#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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with Paul Kemprecos



A Novel from the NUMA Files

WHITE DEATH

A Kurt Austin Adventure

WHITE DEATH By Clive Cussler

PROLOGUE I

West of the British Isles, 1515

DIEGO AGUIRREZ AWOKE from his restless sleep think- ing that a rat had scurried across his face. His wide forehead was bathed in a cold sweat, his heart hammered in his chest, and a formless panic gnawed hungrily at his innards. He listened to the muffled snores of his sleeping crewmen and the chuckle and swash of wavelets against the wooden hull. Nothing appeared to be amiss. Yet he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that an unseen threat lurked in the shadows.

Easing from his hammock, Aguirrez wrapped a thick woolen blanket around his brawny shoulders and climbed a companionway to the fog-shrouded deck. In the muted light of the moon, the solidly built caravel glistened as if it were made of spiderwebs. Aguirrez went over to a form huddled next to the yellow glow of an oil lamp. Good evening, Captain," the man said at his approach.

Aguirrez was pleased to see that the watch was awake and alert.

"Good evening," the captain replied. "All goes well?"

"Yes, sir. Still no wind, though."

Aguirrez glanced up at the ghostly masts and sails. "It will come. I can smell it."

"Aye, Captain," the man said, stifling a yawn.

"Go below and get some sleep. I'll relieve you."

"It isn't time yet. My shift's not over for another turn of the glass."

The captain picked up the hourglass next to the lamp and turned it over. "There," he said. "Now it's time."

The man grunted his thanks and shuffled off to the crew's quar- ters while the captain took up a post in the ship's high, squared-off stern castle. He gazed off to the south, staring into the smoky mists that rose like steam from the mirror-flat sea. He was still at his post when the sun rose. His olive-black eyes were red-

rimmed, and they ached with weariness. His blanket was soggy with moisture. With typical stubbornness, he ignored the discomforts and paced back and forth like a caged tiger.

The captain was a Basque, an inhabitant of the rugged mountains between Spain and France, and his instincts, honed by years at sea, were not to be taken lightly. The Basques were the best sailors in the world, and men like Aguirrez routinely voyaged to regions that more timid mariners regarded as the realm of sea serpents and giant whirlpools. Like many Basques, he had eyebrows like bramble thick- ets, large protruding ears, a long, straight nose and a chin like a mountain ledge. In later years, scientists would suggest that the Basques, with their heavy facial features, were the direct descendants ofCro-Magnon man.

The crew emerged yawning and stretching into the gray predawn light and set about their tasks. The captain refused offers to relieve him. His persistence was rewarded near midmorning. His blood- shot eyes glimpsed a shimmering splinter of light through the thick curtain of haze. The quick nervous flicker lasted only an instant, but it filled Aguirrez with an odd combination of relief and dread.

Pulse quickening, Aguirrez raised the brass spyglass that hung by a cord around his neck, snapped the sections to their full length and squinted through the eyepiece. At first he saw only a gray monotone circle of magnification where the fog bank blended with the sea. The captain wiped his eyes with his sleeve, blinked to clear his vision and raised the telescope again. Again he saw nothing. A trick of the light, he thought.

Suddenly, he saw movement through the lens. A sharp prow had emerged from the mists like the probing beak of a raptor. Then the full length of the boat came into view. The slim black-hulled craft shot forward, glided a few seconds, then surged forward again. Two other ships followed in quick succession, scudding over the flat sur- face like giant water insects. Aguirrez swore softly to himself.

War galleys.

Sunlight reflected off the wet oars that dipped into the sea with a mechanical cadence. With each sweep of the oars, the sleek vessels rapidly closed the gap separating them from the sailing ship.

The captain calmly appraised the fast-approaching ships from stem to stern, taking in the clean, functional lines with the appreci- ation of a skilled

shipbuilder. True greyhounds of the sea, capable of short bursts of high speed, the fighting galleys developed by Venice were used by dozens of European countries.

Each galley was propelled by a hundred-and-fifty oars, three ranks of twenty-five on each side. The low, level profile imparted a stream- lined look that was ahead of its time, gracefully curving up at the rear where the captain's house overhung the stern. The prow was elon- gated, although it no longer functioned as a ram as in times past. I he bow had been transformed into an artillery platform.

A small three-sided lateen sail hung from a single mast near the stern, but human muscle power gave the galley its speed and ma- neuverability. The Spanish penal system provided a steady supply of rowers condemned to die pulling the heavy thirty-foot oars. The cor- sia, a narrow gangway that ran fore and aft, was the realm of hard men who urged the rowers on with threats and whip-lashes.

Aguirrez knew that the firepower arrayed against his ship would be formidable. The galleys were nearly twice the eighty-foot length of his tubby caravel. The fighting galley routinely carried fifty of the single-shot muzzle-loaded smoothbore arquebuses. The heaviest gun, a cast-iron, high-angle mortar called a bombard, was mounted on the bow artillery platform. Its position on the right-front side was a holdover from the days when naval strategy centered on ramming the enemy head-on.

While the galley was a throwback to the sturdy Greek craft that carried Odysseus from Circe to Cyclops, the caravel was the wave of the future. Fast and maneuverable for its day, the rugged ship could sail anywhere on the watery surface of the earth. The caravel blended its southern rigging with a tough northern hull of flush-built plank- ing and a hinged, axeled rudder. The easily rigged lateen sails, de- scended from the Arabic dhow, made the ship far superior to any contemporary sailing vessel when sailing close to the wind.

Unfortunately for Aguirrez, those sails, so miraculous in their sim- ple efficiency, now hung limply from the twin masts. With no breeze to stir the canvas, the sails were useless sheets of fabric. The becalmed caravel was glued to the surface of the sea like a ship in a bottle.

Aguirrez glanced at the lifeless canvas and cursed the elements conspiring

against him. He seethed at the short-sighted arrogance that had led him to defy his instinct to stay far out to sea. With their low freeboard, the galleys were not designed for open waters and would have had difficulty following the caravel. But he had sailed close to land because the route was more direct. With favorable winds, his ship could outrun any vessel on the sea. He'd never anticipated a dead calm. Nor had he expected the galleys to find him so easily.

He brushed away his self-recriminations and suspicions. Time enough to deal with questions later. Tossing his blanket aside as if it were a matador's cape, he strode the length of the ship bellowing or- ders. The men came alive as the captain's powerful voice echoed from one end of the ship to the other. Within seconds, the deck re- sembled a stirred-up anthill.

"Launch the boats!" Aguirrez pointed to the approaching war- ships. "Look smart, lads, or we'll be keeping the executioners work- ing day and night."

They moved to their tasks with quicksilver speed. Every man on board the caravel knew that the horrors of torture and burning at the stake would be their fate if the galleys captured them. Within min- utes, all three of the caravel's boats were in the water, manned by the strongest rowers. The lines attached to the ship went bowstring-taut, but the caravel stubbornly refused to move. Aguirrez yelled at his men to row harder. The air over his head turned blue as he appealed to their Basque manhood with every salty curse he could muster.

"Pull together!" Aguirrez shouted, his dark eyes blazing. "You're rowing like a bunch of Spanish whores."

The oars churned the calm water into a sudsy foam. The ship shuddered and creaked, and finally it began to inch forward. Aguir- rez roared his encouragement and dashed back to the stern. He leaned on the rail and put his eye to his spyglass. Through the lens, he saw a tall, thin man in the bow platform of the lead galley look- ing back at him through a telescope.

'El Brasero,f) Aguirrez whispered with unveiled contempt.

Ignatius Martinez saw Aguirrez looking at him and curled his thick voluptuary's lips in a snarl of triumph. His pitiless yellow eyes burned with fanaticism in their deep-set sockets. The long aristocratic nose was lifted in the air as if it had encountered a bad smell.

"Captain Blackthorne," he purred to the red-bearded man at his side, "spread the word among the rowers. Tell them they will be free if we catch our prey."

The captain shrugged and carried out the order, knowing that Martinez had no intention of keeping his promise, that it was merely a cruel deception.

El Brasero was Spanish for brazier. Martinez had earned his nick- name for his zeal in roasting heretics at the auto de fe, as the public spectacles of punishment were called. He was a familiar figure at the quemerdo, or place of burning, where he used every means, includ- ing bribery, to make sure that he had the honor of lighting the pyre. Although his official title was Public Prosecutor and Advisor to the Inquisition, he had persuaded his higher-ups to appoint him as the Inquisitor in charge of prosecuting the Basques. The prosecution of the Basques was extremely profitable. The Inquisition immediately confiscated the property of the accused. The stolen wealth of its vic- tims financed the Inquisition's prisons, secret police, torture cham- bers, army and bureaucracy, and it made rich men of the Inquisitors.

Basques had brought the arts of navigation and shipbuilding to unheard-of levels of expertise. Aguirrez had sailed to the secret fish- ing grounds across the Western Sea dozens of times on whaling or cod-fishing trips. Basques were natural capitalists, and many, like Aguirrez, had become rich selling whale products and cod. His busy shipyard on the Nervion River built vessels of every type and size. Aguirrez had been aware of the Inquisition and its excesses, but he was too busy running his various enterprises and enjoying the infre- quent company of his beautiful wife and two children to give it much thought. It was on his return from one trip that he had learned first- hand that Martinez and the Inquisition were malevolent forces that could not be ignored.

An angry crowd had greeted the fish-laden ships that edged up to the docks to unload their catch. The people had shouted for Aguir- rez's attention and pleaded for his help. The Inquisition had arrested a group of local women and charged them with witchcraft. His wife had been among those taken. She and the others had been tried and found guilty and were being moved from prison to the burning place.

Aguirrez calmed the crowd and went directly to the provincial capital. Although he was a man of influence, his pleas to free the prisoners fell on deaf ears. Officials said they could do nothing; this was a church matter, not a civil one.

Some whispered that their own lives and property could be placed in jeopardy if they went against the orders of the Holy Office. "HI Brasero" they whispered in fear.

Aguirrez had taken matters into his own hands and rounded up a hundred of his men. They'd attacked the convoy taking the ac- cused witches to the stake, and freed the women without firing a shot. Even as he took his wife into his arms, Aguirrez knew that El Brasero had engineered the witchcraft arrests and trials to bring the Basque and his property within his greedy grasp.

Aguirrez suspected that there was an even more compelling rea- son he had come to the Inquisition's attention. The year before, a council of elders had given him stewardship of the most sacred relics of Basqueland. One day they would be used to rally the Basques in a right for independence against Spain. For now, they were contained in a chest hidden in a secret chamber of Aguirrez's luxurious home. Martinez could have heard of the artifacts. The region was rife with informers. Martinez would know how sacred relics could ignite fa- naticism, in much the same way that the Holy Grail had launched the bloody Crusades. Anything that united the Basques would be a threat to the Inquisition.

Martinez did not respond to the freeing of the women. Aguirrez was no fool. Martinez would strike only after he had collected every scrap of incriminating evidence. Aguirrez used this time to prepare. He put the fastest caravel in his fleet up on the ways at San Sebastian, as if it were undergoing repairs. He spread generous amounts of money around to enlist his own army of spies, including some in the prosecutor's entourage, and made it known that the biggest reward would go to the man who warned of his arrest. Then he went about his business as usual and waited, staying close to home, where he surrounded himself with guards, all veterans of combat.

Several months quietly passed. Then one night, one of his spies, a man who worked in the office of the Inquisition itself, galloped breathlessly up to his villa and pounded on his door. Martinez was leading a group of soldiers to arrest him. Aguirrez paid off the grate- ful spy and put his well-laid plans into effect. He kissed his wife and children good-bye and promised to meet them in Portugal. While his family escaped in a farm wagon with much of their wealth, a decoy was dispatched to lead the arrest party on a merry chase through the countryside. Accompanied by his armed entourage, Aguirrez made his way to the coast. Under cover of darkness, the caravel slid down the ways, unfurled its sails and

headed north.

When the sun rose the next day, a fleet of fighting galleys had emerged from the dawn mists in an attempt to cut the caravel off. Using adroit seamanship, Aguirrez had eluded his pursuers, and a steady breeze had sent the ship winging north along the coast of France. He set a course for Denmark, where he would begin the turn west toward Greenland and Iceland, and the Great Land be- yond. But then, off the British Isles, the ship's wake petered out along with the wind, and Aguirrez and his men found themselves sitting in a pool of dead air...

Now, with the trio of galleys closing in for the kill, Aguirrez was de- termined to fight to the death if need be, but his strongest instinct was survival. He ordered the gun crew to prepare for battle. In arming the caravel, he had sacrificed armament for speed, firepower for flex- ibility.

The standard arquebus was a cumbersome muzzle-loaded matchlock gun that was hooked onto a portable stand and needed two men to load and fire. The gunners on the caravel were armed with smaller, lighter versions that could be fired by one man. His crewmen were excellent marksmen who would make every shot count. For heavy artillery, Aguirrez had chosen a pair of bronze cannon that could be moved on wheeled carriages. The gun crews had drilled to the point where they could load, aim and fire with clockwork preci- sion unheard of in most ships.

The rowers were visibly tired, and the ship was like a fly crawl- ing across a bucket of molasses. The galleys were almost within fir- ing range. Their snipers could pick off the rowers with ease. He decided that the men would have to stay at their oars. As long as the ship moved, Aguirrez had a modicum of control. He urged his men to keep pulling, and he was turning back to help the gun crew when his fine-tuned senses detected a shift in temperature, usually the har- binger of a breeze. The smaller lateen sail flapped like the wing of an injured bird. Then it was still.

As the captain scanned the sea for the puckering of the surface that would herald a puff of wind, he heard the unmistakable roar of a bombard. The wide-mouthed mortar was carried in a fixed carriage with no means of training or elevation. The cannonball splashed harmlessly into the sea about a hundred yards off the caravel's stern. Aguirrez laughed, knowing that it was practically impossible to score a direct hit with a bombard, even on a target as slow-moving as the

caravel.

The galleys had been moving three-abreast. As a cloud of smoke drifted over the water, the galleys flanking the lead boat shot ahead and came straight in behind the caravel. The maneuver was a feint. Both galleys veered to the left, and one took the lead. Galleys had most of their armament on the right front side. As they passed the slow-moving caravel, they could rake its deck and rigging with small and medium guns.

Anticipating the attack, Aguirrez had placed both cannon close to- gether on the port side and covered their muzzles with a black cloth. The enemy would assume that the caravel also carried the ineffi- cient bombard and that its flanks were virtually unprotected.

The captain scanned the artillery platform through the spyglass and swore as he recognized a former crewman who had sailed with him on many fishing trips. The man knew the route Aguirrez fol- lowed to the Western Sea. More than likely, the Inquisition was hold- ing a threat against his family.

Aguirrez checked the elevation of each cannon. He pulled aside the black cloth and sighted through the gun ports on an imaginary circle on the sea. Having encountered no opposition, the first galley came in close to the caravel-and Aguirrez gave the order to fire. Both cannon thundered. One shot was premature and snapped the beak off the galley, but the second cannonball smashed into the ar- tillery platform.

The bow section disintegrated in a burst of fire and smoke. Water poured into the ruptured hull, aided by the galley's forward speed, and the boat slipped below the surface and sank within moments. Aguirrez felt a pang of pity for the rowers, manacled to their oars and unable to escape, but their death would be quick compared to weeks and months of suffering.

The crew of the second galley saw the lead boat's fate, and in a dis- play of the nimbleness the triremes were famous for, it veered sharply away from the caravel, then looped around to rejoin Martinez, who had prudently held his boat back.

Aguirrez guessed that the galleys would split up, come around both sides of the ship, careful to stay out of cannon range, then cir- cle back and attack the vulnerable rowers. Almost as if Martinez were reading his thoughts, the galleys

pulled apart and each began a long swing around the opposite sides of the ship, circling like wary hyenas.

Aguirrez heard a snap above his head, caused by a desultory flap

of the mainsail. He held his breath, wondering if it was only an er- rant puff as before. Then the sail flapped again and filled out, and the masts creaked. He ran to the bow, leaned over the rail and shouted at his deck crew to bring the rowers back on board.

Too late.

The galleys had cut short their long, lazy loop and angled sharply back on a course that brought them directly at the ship. The right- hand galley swung around and presented its long side, and the gun- ners concentrated their arquebus fire on the defenseless longboat. A withering fusillade raked the rowers.

Emboldened, the second galley tried the same maneuver on the port side. The caravel's marksmen had rallied after being taken by surprise, and they concentrated their fire on the exposed artillery platform where Aguirrez had last seen Martinez. ElBrasero was un- doubtedly hiding behind thick wood, but he would get the message.

The volley hit the platform like a leaden fist. As soon as the marks- "en let off one shot, they picked up another weapon and fired again, while crewmen feverishly reloaded the guns. The fusillade was con- tinuous and deadly. Unable to withstand the prolonged hail of fire, the galley veered off, its hull splintered and its oars in fragments.

The caravel's crew rushed to haul in the long boats. The first boat was bathed in blood and half the rowers were dead. Aguirrez yelled orders to his heavy gunners, raced to the helm and grabbed the wheel. Gun crews swarmed around the cannon and muscled the heavy weapons into the bow gunports. Other deckhands adjusted the rig- ging to wring the most out of the freshening breeze.

As the caravel picked up speed, leaving a growing wake, the cap- tain steered the ship toward the galley that had been raked by fire from his gunners. The galley tried to elude him, but it had lost row- ers and was moving erratically. Aguirrez waited until he was within fifty yards. The galley's gunners fired at their pursuer, but the shots had little effect.

The cannon boomed and the balls scored a direct hit on the roofed captain's house on the stern, blasting it to toothpicks. The cannon were speedily reloaded and aimed at the galley's waterline, where they punched massive holes in the hull. Heavy with men and equip- ment, the galley quickly slipped under the surface, leaving bubbles, shards of wood and a few hapless swimmers to mark its passing.

The captain turned his attention to the third galley.

Seeing the odds change, Martinez was on the run. His galley sped off to the south like a startled hare. The agile caravel turned from its kill and tried to follow. Aguirrez had blood in his eyes as he savored the prospect of dousing El Brasero's fire.

It was not to be. The freshening breeze was still gentle, and the caravel could not match the speed of the fleeing galley, whose row- ers were pulling for their lives. Before long, the galley was a dark spot on the ocean.

Aguirrez would have chased Martinez to the ends of the earth, but he saw sails on the horizon and guessed that they might be enemy re- inforcements. The Inquisition had a long reach. He remembered his promise to his wife and children and his responsibility to the Basque people. Reluctantly, he swung the ship around and set a course north toward Denmark. Aguirrez had no illusions about his enemy. Mar- tinez might be a coward, but he was patient and persistent. It would be only a matter of time before they met again.

PROLOGUE II

Germany, 1935

SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, the dogs began to howl along a swath of countryside between the city of Hamburg and the North Sea. Terrified canines stared at the black, moonless sky with lolling tongues and shivering haunches. Their keen hearing had picked up what human ears could not: the faint whir of engines from the giant silver-skinned torpedo that slithered through the thick layer of clouds high above.

Four Maybach 12-cylinder engines, a pair on each side, hung in streamlined housings from the bottom of the 800-foot-long airship. Lights glowed in the

oversized windows of the control car near the rront of the fuselage. The long, narrow control car was organized like a ship's pilothouse, complete with compass and spoked steering wheels for the rudder and elevators. standing next to the helmsman, feet wide apart, arms clasped behind his back, was Captain Heinrich Braun, a tall ramrod-straight figure impeccably dressed in a dark-blue uniform and a tall-peaked cap. Cold had seeped into the cabin and overwhelmed its heaters, so he wore a thick turtleneck sweater under his jacket. Braun's haughty profile could have been chiseled from granite. His rigid posture and silver hair, cropped close to his scalp military-style, and the slight elevation to his jutting chin, recalled his days as a Pruss- ian naval officer.

Braun checked the compass heading, then turned to a portly middle-aged man whose bushy, upturned mustache made him re- semble a good-natured walrus.

"Well, Herr Lutz, we have successfully completed the first leg of our historic journey." Braun had an elegant, anachronistic way of speaking. "We are maintaining our goal of one hundred twenty kilo- meters per hour. Even with a slight headwind, fuel consumption is exactly as calculated. My compliments, Herr Professor."

Herman Lutz looked like the bartender in a Munich beer cellar, but he was one of the most highly skilled aeronautical engineers in Europe. After his retirement, Braun had written a book suggesting airship service across the pole to North America. At a lecture pro- moting his book, he'd met Lutz, who was trying to raise money to fund a polar airship venture. The men were drawn to each other by their firm belief that airships could promote international cooperation.

Lutz's blue eyes danced with excitement. "My congratulations to you, Captain Braun. Together we will advance the greater glory of world peace."

"I'm sure you mean the greater glory ofGermany" sneered Ger- hardt Heinz, a short, slight man who had been standing behind the others, close enough to hear every word. With great ceremony, he lit up a cigarette.

In a steel-tipped voice, Braun said, "Herr Heinz, have you for- gotten that above our heads are thousands of cubic feet of highly flammable hydrogen? Smoking is permitted only in the section so designated in the crew's quarters."

Heinz mumbled an answer and snuffed out the cigarette with his fingers. Attempting to gain the edge, he drew himself up like a preen- ins rooster. Heinz

had shaved his head to the skin and affected a pince-nez for his nearsighted eyes. The pale-white head was perched on narrow shoulders. While the effect was supposed to be intimi- dating, it was more grotesque.

Lutz thought that, with his tight black leather overcoat, Heinz looked like a maggot emerging from its pupa, but he wisely kept this thought to himself. Having Heinz on board was the price he and Braun had had to pay to get the airship into the air. That and the aircraft's name: Nieztsche, after the German philosopher. Germany was struggling to get out from under the financial and psychologi- cal yoke imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. When Lutz had pro- posed an airship voyage to the North Pole, the public had been eager to contribute funds, but the project had stagnated.

A group of industrialists quietly approached Lutz with a new proposition. With military backing, they would fund an airship to make a secret trip to the North Pole. If the mission succeeded, it would be made public, and the Allies would be presented with a fait accompli that displayed the superiority of German air technology. Failure would be kept a secret to avoid a black mark. The airship was built under cover, Lutz patterning it on the huge airship Gmf Zep- pelin. As part of the deal, he agreed to take Heinz along on the ex- pedition to represent the interests of the industrialists.

"Captain, would you enlighten us as to our progress?" Lutz said.

Braun stepped over to a chart table. "Here is our position. We will follow the course taken by the Norge and the Italia to the Spitsber- gen Islands. From there we make the dash to the pole. I expect the last leg to take about fifteen hours, depending on weather."

"I hope we have better luck than the Italians," Heinz said, un- necessarily reminding the others of previous airship attempts to reach the pole. In 1926, the Norwegian explorer Amundsen and an Italian engineer named Umberto Nobile had successfully reached and cir- cled the pole in an Italian dirigible named the Norge. However, No- bile's second expedition in the sister ship known as the Italia was supposed to have landed at the pole, but it had crashed. Amundsen had been lost in a rescue attempt. Nobile and some of his men were finally rescued.

"It is not a question of luck," said Lutz. "This airship's design built on the mistakes of others, precisely with this mission in mind. It is stronger and better

able to handle rough weather. It has redun- dant communications systems. The use of Blaugas will allow for greater control because we won't have to vent hydrogen as ballast. We have defrosting ability in our controls. Its machinery is made to op- erate at subfreezing Arctic temperatures. It is the fastest airship ever built. We have a network of planes and ships in place that will re- spond immediately if we run into any problems. Our meteorologi- cal capacity is second to none."

"I have the utmost confidence in you and the ship," Heinz said with an unctuous smile, as his natural inclination to toady up to oth- ers came to the fore.

"Good. I suggest we all get some rest before we reach Spitsbergen. We will refuel there, and proceed to the pole."

The trip to Spitsbergen was uneventful. Contacted by radio, the refueling and resupply crew was ready, and the airship was on its way within hours, heading north, past the Franz Josef archipelago.

The dull gray sea below was speckled with pieces of floating ice. The chunks eventually graduated to large irregular pancakes that joined to form ice broken here and there by dark black veins of open water. Near the pole, the ice became a vast, unbroken expanse. Al- though the bluish-white surface looked flat from a thousand feet in the air, land explorers had learned the hard way that it was criss-crossed by ridges and hummocks.

"Good news," Braun announced cheerfully. "We are at eighty- five degrees north. We will make the pole soon. The weather condi- tions are ideal. No wind. Clear skies."

The anticipation grew, and even those who were off-duty crowded into the control cabin and peered out the big windows as if they hoped to see a tall striped shaft marking the spot at 90 degrees north.

One observer called out, "Captain, I think I see something on the ice.

The captain peered through his binoculars at where the crewman was pointing.

"Most interesting." He handed the binoculars to Lutz.

"It's a boat," Lutz said after a moment. Braun nodded in agreement and directed

the helmsman to change course.

"What are you doing?" Heinz said.

Braun handed him the binoculars. "Look," he said, without elab- oration.

Heinz fumbled with his pince-nez and squinted through the glasses. "I see nothing," he said flatly.

Braun wasn't surprised at the answer. The man was as blind as a bat. "Nevertheless, there is a boat on the ice."

What would a boat be doing here?" Heinz said, eyes blinking rap- idly. "I've heard of no other expeditions to the pole. I order you to re- turn to our course."

On what grounds, Herr Heinz?" the captain asked, elevating his chin even more. It was apparent from the coldness of his voice that he didn't care what the reply would be.

Our mission is to go to the North Pole," Heinz said.

Captain Braun glared at Heinz as if he was about to kick the lit- tle man out the door and watch his body fall onto the pack ice.

Lutz recognized the dangerous mood the captain was in and in- tervened. "Herr Heinz, you are right, my friend. But I believe our charge was also to investigate any matter that may be of aid to us or the next expedition."

Braun added, "In addition, we are duty-bound, no less than any ship that sails the sea, to help those who may be in distress."

"If they see us, they will radio someone and jeopardize our mis- sion," Heinz said, trying another tack.

"They would have to be blind and deaf not to have seen or heard us," said Braun. "And if they report our presence, so what? Our ship has no markings except for the name."

Seeing he was defeated, Heinz slowly lit up a cigarette and con- spicuously blew smoke in the air, daring the captain to stop him.

The captain ignored the defiant gesture and gave the order to de- scend. The helmsman adjusted the controls, and the giant airship began its long, sloping glide down to the pack ice.

1

The Faroe Islands, the present

THE LONE SHIP bearing down on the Faroe Islands looked like the loser in a paint-ball fight. The hull of the 170-foot Sea Sentinel was splashed from stem to stern with an eye-blinding psy- chedelic potpourri of tie-dye rainbow colors. A piping calliope and a crew of clowns would not have been out of place to complete the carnival atmosphere. The ship's raffish appearance was deceptive. As many had learned to their sorrow, the Sea Sentinel was as dan- gerous in its own way as any vessel in the pages of Jane s Fighting Ships.

The Sea Sentinel had arrived in Faroe waters after a 180-mile trip

from the Shetland Islands off of Scotland. Greeting the vessel was a small flotilla of fishing boats and yachts hired by international press organizations. The Danish cruiser LeifErifson stood by, and a hel- icopter circled above in the overcast sky.

It was drizzling, typical summer weather for the Faroes, an ar- chipelago of eighteen specks of rock located in the northeast Atlantic halfway between Denmark and Iceland. The 45,000 human inhabi- tants of the Faroes are largely descended from the Vikings, who set- tled there in the ninth century. Although the islands are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, the locals speak a language derived from old Norse. The people are outnumbered by the millions of birds that nest in the towering cliffs that stand like ramparts against the sea.

A tall, ruggedly built man in his forties stood on the ship's fore- deck surrounded by reporters and camera technicians. Marcus Ryan, the captain of the Sea Sentinel, was conservatively dressed in a black tailored officer's uniform decorated with gold braid on the collar and sleeves. With his movie star profile, tanned skin, the collar-length hair tousled by the breeze and the fringe of ginger-colored beard framing his square jaw, Ryan looked as if he had been cast for the movie role of a dashing sea captain. The image was one he went to great pains to cultivate.

"Congratulations, ladies and gentlemen," Ryan said in a well- modulated voice that carried over the rumble of engines and the swash of water against the hull. "Sorry we couldn't have provided smoother seas. Some of you look a bit green around the gills after our trip from the Shetlands."

The members of the press pool had been chosen by lot to cover the invasion story. After a night spent in cramped bunks as the ship nav- igated rolling seas, some members of the Fourth Estate were wish- ing they hadn't been so lucky.

"That's okay," croaked a female reporter from CNN. "Just make sure the story is worth all the damned Dramamine I swallowed."

Ryan flashed his Hollywood smile. "I can almost guarantee that you'll see action." He swept his arm theatrically in a wide arc. The cameras dutifully followed his pointing finger to the warship. The cruiser was moving in a wide circle, just fast enough to maintain headway. Fluttering from its main mast was the red-and-white flag of Denmark. "The last time we tried to stop the Faroese from slaugh- tering pilot whales, that Danish cruiser you see fired a shot across our bow. Small arms fire narrowly missed one of our crew, although the Danes deny they shot at us."

"Did you really slam them with a garbage gun?" asked the CNN reporter.

"We defended ourselves with the materials at hand," Ryan replied with mock seriousness. "Our cook had rigged up a catapult to launch biodegradable garbage bags off the deck. He's a medieval weapons buff, so he developed a gadget similar to a trebuchet that had a sur- prising range. When the cruiser tried to cut us off, we nailed it with a direct hit, much to our surprise. And theirs" He paused and with per- fect comic timing said, "There's nothing like being slimed with potato peels, eggshells and coffee grounds to take the wind out of your sails."

Laughter rippled through the group.

The BBC reporter said, "Aren't you worried that antics of that sort add to the reputation given to the Sentinels of the Sea as one of the more radical environmental and animal rights groups? Your organization has freely admitted to scuttling whaling ships, blocking waterways, spray-painting baby seals, harassing sealers, cutting drift nets..."

Ryan raised his hand in protest. "Those were pirate whale ships, international waters, and the other stuff you mentioned we can doc- ument as legal under international agreements. On the other hand, our ships have been rammed, our people gassed and shot at and ille- gal arrests made."

"What do you say to those people who call you a terrorist organi- zation?" a reporter from The Economist said.

"I would ask them: What could be more terrifying than the cold- blooded slaughter of fifteen hundred to two thousand defenseless pilot whales each year? And I would remind them that no one has ever been hurt or killed by an SOS intervention." Ryan flashed his smile again. "C'mon, folks, you've met the people on this ship." He gestured toward an attractive young woman who had been standing apart from the others, listening to the discussion. "Tell me honestly, does this lady look scary?"

Therri Weld was in her mid-thirties, of medium height, with a compact, well-proportioned body. The faded jeans and workshirt she wore under her baggy windbreaker did little to disguise her ath- letic but distinctly feminine figure. An SOS baseball hat covered chestnut hair whose natural curl was made even more pronounced by the damp air, and her gentian eyes were alert and intelligent. She stepped forward and gave the press corps a bright smile.

"I've already met most of you," she said, in a voice that was low but clear. "So you know that when Marcus doesn't have me slaving away as a deckhand, I'm a legal advisor to SOS. As Marcus said, we use direct action as a last resort. We pulled back after our last en- counter in these waters to pursue a boycott of Faroe fish."

"But you still haven't stopped the grinds/9 the BBC reporter said to Ryan.

"The Sentinels have never underestimated how tough it would be to end a tradition that goes back hundreds of years," Ryan answered. "The Faroese have the same stubbornness their Viking forefathers needed to survive. They're not about to give in to a bunch ofwhale- huggers like us. But while I admire the Faroese, I think the grindarap is cruel and barbaric. It's unworthy of the islanders as a people. I know a few of you have been to a grind before. Anyone care to sum it up.

"Damned bloody business," the BBC reporter admitted. "But I don't like fox

hunts, either."

"At least the fox has a sporting chance," Ryan said, his jaw hard- ening. "The grind is simply a massacre. When someone spots a pod of pilot whales, the siren goes off, and boats herd the whales in to shore. The locals-women and kids sometimes-are waiting on the beach. There's a lot of drinking and it's a big party, for everyone except the whales. The people stick gaffs into the whales' blowholes and drag the animals inshore, where they have their jugular veins cut and they bleed to death. The water turns red from the blood-letting. Some- times you'll see people sawing the animals' heads off while the whales are still alive!"

A blond female reporter said, "How is a grind any different from slaughtering steers for beef?"

"You're asking the wrong person," Ryan said. "I'm a vegan." He waited for the laughter to die down. "Your point is well-taken, though. We may be protecting the Faroese from themselves. Pilot- whale meat is loaded with mercury and cadmium. It's hurting their children."

"But if they want to poison themselves and their kids," the re- porter said, "isn't it intolerant of SOS to condemn their traditions?"

"Gladiatorial combat and public executions were traditions once. Civilization decided these savage spectacles have no place in the mod- ern world. Inflicting unnecessary pain on defenseless animals is the same thing. They say it's tradition. We say it's murder. That's why we're back."

"Why not continue with the boycott?" the BBC man asked. Therri addressed the question. "The boycott was too slow. Hun- dreds of pilot whales continue to be killed. So we've changed our strategy. The oil industry wants to sink wells in these waters. If we bring enough bad publicity to the hunt, the oil companies might hold back. That would put pressure on the islanders to end their grinds."

"And we've got other business here as well," Ryan added. "There's a multinational fish-processing company that we're going to picket to demonstrate our opposition to the harmful effects offish-farming."

The Fox News reporter was incredulous. "Is there anyone you don't plan to antagonize?"

"Let me know who we've missed," Ryan said to laughter.

The BBC man said, "How far do you intend to push your protest?"

"As far as we can. This hunt is illegal under international law, in our opinion. You people are here as witnesses. Things could get dicey. If anyone wants to leave now, I can arrange a transfer." He scanned the faces surrounding him and smiled. "No one? Good. Well, then, brave souls, into the breach we go. We've been keeping track of several pods of pilot whales. The waters around here fairly teem with them. That young deckhand you see waving wildly may have something to tell us."

A crew member who had been keeping watch trotted over. "A couple of pods are passing by Stremoy/' he said. "Our observer on shore says the siren's wailing and the boats are being launched."

Ryan turned back to the reporters. "They'll probably try to drive the whales ashore at the Kvivik killing field. We'll put ourselves be- tween the boats and the whales. If we can't drive the pod away, we'll start cutting the boats off."

The CNN reporter pointed to the cruiser. "Isn't it going to irritate those chaps?"

"I'm counting on it," Ryan said, with a ferocious grin.

High in the bridge of the LeifErifsson, a man in civilian clothes squinted at the Sea Sentinel through a powerful pair of binoculars. "My God," Karl Becker murmured to Eric Petersen, the ship's cap- tain, "that ship looks as if it were painted by a madman."

"Ah, so you know Captain Ryan," Petersen replied, with a faint smile.

"Only by reputation. He seems to have what the Americans call a Teflon shield. For all his law-breaking, he has never been convicted on any charge. What do you know of Ryan, Captain?"

"First of all, he is not mad. He is possessed with a near-fanatical determination, but all his actions are measured. Even the gaudy color scheme of his ship is calculated. It lulls unsuspecting opponents into making mistakes-and shows up quite well on television."

"Maybe we could arrest them for visual pollution of the sea, Cap- tain Petersen," said Becker.

"I suspect Ryan would find an expert to say the ship is nothing less than a floating work of art."

"Glad to see that you've maintained your sense of humor despite the humiliation this ship suffered from its last encounter with the Sentinels of the Sea."

"It only took a few minutes of hosing down the deck to get rid of the garbage they threw at us. My predecessor felt that it was neces- sary to respond to the garbage attack with gunfire."

Becker winced. "Captain Olafsen was still commanding a desk the last time I heard. The publicity was incredibly bad. 'Danish War- ship Attacks Unarmed Boat.' Headlines that the crew was drunk. My God, what a disaster!"

"Having served as Olafsen's first officer, I have the greatest re- spect for his judgment. His problem was that he didn't have clear di- rection from the bureaucrats in Copenhagen."

"Bureaucrats like me?" Becker said.

The captain responded with a tight smile. "I follow orders. My su- periors said that you were coming aboard as a navy-department ob- server. Here you are."

"I wouldn't want a bureaucrat aboard my ship if I were in your shoes. But I assure you, I have no authority to supersede your orders. I will, of course, report what I see and hear, but let me remind you that if this mission is a fiasco, both our heads will roll."

The captain hadn't known what to make of Becker when he first welcomed him aboard the Erilsson. The official was short and dark, and with his large, moist eyes and long nose, he looked like a de- spondent cormorant. Petersen, on the other hand, fit the common mold for many Danish men. He was tall, square-jawed and blond.

"I was reluctant to have you aboard," the captain said, "but the hot- heads who are involved in this situation could let things get out of control. I welcome the opportunity to consult with someone from the government."

Becker thanked the captain and said, "What do you think of this grindarap business ? "

The captain shrugged. "I have many friends on the island. They would rather die than give up their old customs. They say it's what makes them who they are. I respect their feelings. And you?"

"I'm a Copenhagener. This whale thing seems like a big waste of time to me. But there's a great deal at stake here. The government respects the wishes of the islanders, but the boycott has hurt their fish- ing. We don't want the Faroes to lose their livelihood so that they be- come a ward of the state. Too damned expensive. To say nothing of the revenue losses to our country if the oil companies are persuaded to hold back their drilling because of this whale hunt."

"I'm well aware that this situation is something of a morality play. All the actors know their roles exactly. The islanders have planned this grind to defy SOS and to make sure Parliament is aware of their concerns. Ryan has been just as vocal in saying he won't allow any- thing to stand in his way."

"And you. Captain Petersen, do you know your role?" "Of course. I just don't know how the drama ends." Becker grunted in answer.

"Let me reassure you," the captain said, "the Faroe Police have been ordered to stay in the background. Under no circumstances am I to use guns. My orders are to protect the islanders from danger. I can use my judgment on how this is to be done. If the Sea Sentinel comes close enough to endanger the smaller boats, then I have the au- thority to nudge the SOS ship aside. Please excuse me, Mr. Becker. I see that the curtain is about to go up."

From several harbors, fishing boats were racing to a disturbed area of ocean. They were moving fast, their bows up on plane, bounc- ing over the low chop. The boats were converging on a spot where the shiny black backs of a pod of pilot whales broke the surface. Fountains of spray exploded from the whales' blowholes.

The Sea Sentinel was also moving in on the whales. Petersen gave his helmsman orders. The cruiser broke out of its holding pattern.

Becker had been mulling over Petersen's earlier words.

"Tell me, Captain, when does a 'nudge' become a ram?"

"Whenever I want it to."

"Isn't there a fine line between the two?"

Petersen told his helmsman to increase speed and set a course di- rectly toward the Sea Sentinel. Then the captain turned to Becker and gave him a grim smile.

"We're about to find out."

2

RYAN WATCHED THE cruiser break out of its lazy circle and head toward the SOS ship. "Looks like Hamlet finally made a decision," he said to Chuck Mercer, his first mate, who was at the wheel of the Sea Sentinel.

The Sea Sentinel had been trying to drive the whales out to sea. The pod held about fifty pilot whales, and some of the female whales were holding back to stay with their calves, slowing the rescue at- tempt. The SOS ship zigzagged like a lone cowpoke trying to corral stray cattle, but the nervous whales made the job almost impossible.

"Like herding cats," Ryan muttered. He went out on the star- board bridge wing to see how close the advancing whaleboats were to the pod. He had never seen so many islanders involved in a grind. It seemed as if every harbor in the Faroes had emptied out. Dozens of boats, ranging in size from commercial trawlers to open dories powered by outboard motors, were speeding from several different directions to join the hunt. The dark water was streaked with their wakes.

Therri Weld was already out on the wing, watching the armada gather. "You've got to admire their stubbornness," she said.

Ryan was equally awestruck. He nodded in agreement. "Now I know how Custer felt. The Faroese are going all out to defend their bloody traditions."

"This is no spontaneous outpouring," Therri said. "From the or- derly way they're moving, they've got a plan."

The words had barely left her lips when, as if on signal, the ad- vancing fleet began to split up in a pincer movement. In a classic mil- itary flanking maneuver, the boats swept around Ryan's ship so they were on the seaward side of the slow-moving whales. They spread out in a line, facing inshore, with the pilot whales between them and the Sea Sentinel. The ends of the line began to curve slowly inward. The whales bunched closer together and moved toward shore.

Ryan was afraid of hurting the panicked whales or breaking up family units if the ship stood in place. Reluctantly, he ordered the helmsman to move the ship out of the path of the hunt.

As the Sea Sentinel moved aside, a loud chorus of triumphant cheers went up from the fishermen. The line of boats began to wrap itself around the hapless whales in a deadly embrace. The whale- boats moved forward, tightening up the line to drive their prey to the killing field, where the sharp knives and spears of the executioners awaited.

Ryan ordered Mercer to steer the Sea Sentinel out to open water.

"Giving up awfully easy," Mercer said. "Wait and see," Ryan said, with an enigmatic smile. The cruiser came up alongside the Sea Sentinel like a cop escort- ing an unruly spectator from a soccer game, but when the ships were about a half mile from the whale hunt, the navy escort began to fall back. Ryan took over the wheel, frequently checking the cruisers lo- cation. When the ships were in what he judged to be the right posi- tion, he picked up the phone to the engine room. "Full speed ahead," he ordered.

The Sea Sentinel was a clunky wide-beamed vessel, high at both ends, with a silhouette like an old-fashioned bathtub. The slow- moving research ship was designed mainly as a stable platform from which to launch undersea instrumentation and nets. The first thing Ryan had done after SOS had acquired the ship at auction was to out- fit the engine room with powerful diesels that could push her along at a more respectable clip.

Ryan cut the wheel hard left. The ship shivered from the strain as it circled about in a great arcing swash of foam and raced back to- ward the whale hunt. Caught off-guard, the cruiser attempted to follow, but the warship couldn't match the Sea Sentinel's tight turn and went wide, losing valuable seconds.

The whale hunt had advanced to within a mile of shore when the Sea Sentinel

caught up with the pod and the line of herdsmen. The SOS ship made a sharp turn that brought it across the wakes of the whaleboats. Ryan stayed at the wheel. He wanted sole responsibility in case something went wrong. His plan to disrupt the hunt required a deft touch on the helm. Too fast or too close, and the whalers would be overturned and thrown into the frigid water. He kept the ship at an even speed, using its broad beam to create a following sea. The wave hit the boats stern-on. Some boats managed to ride the wave that lifted them out of the water. Others lost headway and spun around in a wild attempt to prevent pitchpoling.

The line broke up into a disorganized jumble, leaving large open spaces between the boats, like gaps in a row of teeth. Ryan spun the wheel again and brought the Sea Sentinel around in another sharp turn that placed the ship broadside to the advancing whales. The whales fleeing the advancing whalers sensed the presence of the ves- sel, turned back in the opposite direction and began to break through the openings in the hunt line.

Now it was the turn of the Sea Sentinel's crew to cheer-but their jubilation was short-lived. The faster-moving cruiser had caught up with the SOS ship and was alongside no more than a hundred yards away, matching the Sea Sentinel's speed knot for knot. A voice speak- ing in English crackled over the radio.

"This is Captain Petersen of the LeifErilsson calling the SOS ves- sel Sea Sentinel.)

Ryan snatched up the microphone. "This is Captain Ryan. What can I do for you, Captain Petersen?"

"You are requested to move your ship to open water." "We are acting in accordance with international law." He gave Therri a crooked grin. "My legal advisor is standing here by my side."

"I don't intend to debate the finer points of the law with you or your advisors, Captain Ryan. You are endangering Danish fishermen. I have the authority to use force. If you don't move immediately, I will blow your ship out of the water."

The gun turret on the frigate's fore deck turned so that the barrel was pointed directly at the Sea Sentinel.

"That's a dangerous game you're playing," Ryan said with delib- erate calmness.

"A bad shot could miss us and sink some of those fish- ermen you're trying to protect."

Petersen said, "I don't think we would miss at this range, but I want to avoid bloodshed. You've given the TV cameras plenty of footage. Many pilot whales have escaped, and the hunt has been dis- rupted. You've made your point and are no longer welcome."

Ryan chuckled. "Nice to deal with a reasonable man. Unlike your gun-happy predecessor. Okay, I will pull out of the way, but we're not leaving Faroe waters. We've got other business."

"You are free to do as you please, as long as it doesn't break our laws or endanger our people."

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief, his outward serenity only an act- he was aware of the danger to his crew and the press people. He turned the helm back to his first mate and gave the order to move off slowly. Once beyond the hunt area, the Sea Sentinel headed out to sea. Ryan's plan was to anchor the ship a few miles offshore while he pre- pared for the protest against the fish farm.

Chastened by the Sea Sentinel's earlier move, Petersen made sure the cruiser stayed slightly behind, ready to dart in and cut off the ship if it tried to break away.

Therri broke the tension in the pilothouse. "Captain Petersen doesn't know what a narrow escape he just had," she said, with a grin.

"One shot and I would have dragged him into court and slapped a property lien on his ship."

"I think he was more afraid of our garbage gun," Ryan said. Their mirth was cut short by the sound of Mercer swearing. Ryan said, "What's wrong, Chuck?"

"Damnit, Mark." Mercer was standing with both hands on the wheel. "You must have messed up the steering pushing this ship around like a Jet Ski." He frowned, then stepped back. "Here, you try it."

Ryan tried to turn the wheel. It gave for an inch on either side, but it seemed locked into place. He exerted a slight pressure, then gave up. "The damned thing

is locked into place," Ryan said, with a com- bination of anger and puzzlement.

Ryan picked up the telephone, ordered the engine room to stop and turned his attention back to the wheel. Instead of slowing down, the ship inexplicably picked up speed. Ryan swore and called down to the engine room again.

"What's wrong, Cal?" he barked. "Those engines finally made you deaf? I said cut speed, not increase it."

Ryan's engineer, Cal Rumson, was a topflight seaman. "Hell, I know what you said," Cal replied. The frustration in his voice was obvious. "I did reduce speed. The engines are acting crazy. The con- trols don't seem to be working."

"Then kill the power," Ryan said.

"I'm trying, but the diesels are work ing harder

"Keep trying, Cal."

Ryan slammed the phone in its cradle. This was insanity! The ship seemed to have a mind of her own. Ryan's eyes swept the sea ahead of the ship. Good news. No vessels or land masses in the way. The worst that could happen would be to run out of fuel in the At- lantic. Ryan picked up the radio microphone to inform the cruiser of their predicament. But he was interrupted by a yell from Mercer.

"The wheel's turning!"

Mercer was trying to hold on to the wheel, which was gradually spinning slowly to the right, bringing the ship around toward the cruiser. Ryan grabbed the rim, then he and Mercer tried to bring the ship back on course. They used every ounce of strength they could muster, but the wheel slipped out of their sweaty hands and the Sea Sentinel moved closer to the warship.

The Danish ship had taken notice of the course change. A famil- iar voice crackled over the radio.

"Come in, Sea Sentinel. This is Captain Petersen. What is the in- tention of your course change?"

"We're having problems with our steering. The wheel is locked and we can't shut down our engines."

"That's impossible," Petersen said.

"Tell that to the ship!"

A pause. Then Petersen said, "We'll bear off to give you plenty of sea room. We'll issue a warning as to any ships in your way."

"Thanks. Looks like you'll get your wish about us leaving the Faroes."

The cruiser began to peel away.

But before the Danish ship could veer off, the Sea Sentinel made a sharp turn and drove toward the cruiser's exposed side like a water- borne guided missile.

Sailors lined the cruiser's decks and frantically tried to wave off the advancing ship. The cruiser blew short, rapid warning bursts of its horn. Voices squawked over the radio in Danish and English.

Seeing that the ships were within seconds of disaster, the sailors ran for their lives.

In a last desperate attempt to avert a certain collision, Ryan put all his weight into the wheel. He was still hanging on when the ship smashed into the side of the cruiser. The Sea Sentinel's sharp bow pen- etrated the steel hull plates like a bayonet, then slid off the moving ship in a horrendous shriek of tearing metal.

The Sea Sentinel wallowed in the ocean like a dazed boxer who had just taken a hard right to the nose. The cruiser was struggling to keep afloat, as thousands of gallons of water poured in through the gaping hole in the hull. Crewmen scrambled into the lifeboats and prepared to lower them into the cold sea.

Therri had been thrown to her knees by the impact. Ryan helped her to her feet, and he and the others in the pilothouse dashed down to the deck. The panicked TV people, seeing that they were now part of the story rather than covering it, were trying to get someone to tell them what to do. People were bruised and limping.

Someone was screaming for help, and crew and press people were extracting a bloody body from the metal mush that was all that was left of the bow section.

Ryan shouted orders to abandon ship.

With all the yelling and confusion, no one looked up to see the hel- icopter wheeling high above the ships. The chopper circled a few times like a hungry buzzard, then headed off along the coast.

3

Off the northern coast of Russia

TWELVE HUNDRED MILE S southeast of the Faroe Islands, the search-and-survey ship William Beebe lay at anchor in the frigid waters of the Barents Sea. The letters NUMA were embla- zoned on the 250-foot-long turquoise hull. Named after one of the pioneers in deep-sea exploration, the Beebe bristled with muscular cranes and winches capable of hoisting entire boats off the ocean floor.

Four crewmen dressed in Neoprene wetsuits stood on the stern deck, eyes fixed on a patch of ocean where the surface roiled like a bubbling cauldron. The surface grew paler and mounded into a foamy white dome, and the submersible rescue vehicle Sea Lamprey burst from the water like a mutant leviathan coming up for air. With the precision of a navy assault team, the ready crew pushed an outboard-powered inflatable down the stern ramp into the water, scrambled aboard and raced toward the wallowing submersible.

The ready team attached a towline to the bright-orange vehicle, and a winch on board the Beebe hauled in the submersible until it was under the tall A-frame that angled out over the ship's stern. Kevlar cables were fastened to eyebolts on the submersible's abbreviated deck. The powerful A-frame motor growled, and the submersible was hoisted from the sea. As it dangled from the cables, the Sea Lam- prey offered a full view of its unlovely cylindrical hull and strangely truncated accordion bow.

The A-frame swung slowly over the deck and lowered the vehi- cle into a custom-made steel cradle, while the waiting deck crew placed a ladder against the cradle. Then the hatch at the top of the low conning tower opened and clanged back on its hinges. Kurt Austin poked his head out and blinked like a mole. His steel-gray, almost platinum, hair was radiant in the intense metallic

light of the overcast sky.

Austin greeted the deck crew with a wave, then squeezed his

broad shoulders through the narrow hatchway, climbed out and stood next to the conning tower. Seconds later, his partner, Joe Zavala, stuck his head out into the fresh air and handed his partner a shiny aluminum case.

Austin tossed the case down to a stocky, middle-aged man who stood at the base of the ladder. The man was dressed in a wool turtleneck sweater, yellow rainproof pants and a slicker. Only the high-peaked cap on his head identified him as Russian navy. When he saw the case go airborne, he let out a yell of despair. He caught the container, hobbled it for an instant, then hugged it close to his chest.

As Austin and Zavala descended the ladder, the Russian opened the case and removed a paper-wrapped object cushioned in protec- tive plastic foam, then he unwrapped the paper to reveal a heavy square bottle. Holding it like a newborn, he mumbled in Russian.

Noticing the perplexed looks on the faces of the NUMA men, he said, "Pardon me gentlemen. I was offering a prayer of thanks that the contents of the container were undamaged."

Austin eyed the label and grimaced. "We just dove three hundred feet and cracked into a submarine to retrieve a bottle ofvodla?"

"Oh no,ff Vlasov replied, digging into the case. "Three bottles. The finest vodka made in Russia." He carefully unwrapped the other containers and planted a noisy kiss on each one before laying it back in the case. "Jewel of Russia is one of our finest and Moskovska is su- perb. Charodei is the best chilled."

Austin wondered if he would ever understand the Russian mind- set. "Of course," he said cheerfully. "Sinking a submarine to keep your booze cool makes perfect sense when you explain it that way."

"The submarine was an old Foxtrot-class boat used for training," Vlasov said. "It hadn't seen service for more than thirty years." He gave Austin a 14-karat-gold smile. "You must admit it was your idea to place objects on the sub to test your ability to retrieve them."

"Mea culpa. It didn't seem like a bad idea at the time."

Vlasov closed the cover of the case. "Your dive was a success, then?"

"By and large," Zavala said. "We've got a few technical problems. Nothing major."

"Then we must celebrate with a drink," Vlasov said.

Austin reached over and took the case from the Russian's hand. "No time like the present."

They picked up three plastic cups from the mess hall, then headed for the ready room. Vlasov opened the bottle of Charodei and poured a healthy portion into each cup. He raised his drink in toast. "Here's to the brave young men who died on the Kursk.

Vlasov slugged down the vodka as if he were drinking herbal tea.

Austin sipped his drink. He knew from past experience that demons lurked in the potent Russian firewater.

"And here's to something like the Kursk never happening again," Austin said.

The Kursk sinking had been one of the worst submarine disasters on record. More than a hundred crewmen had died in 2000 when the Oscar II-class cruise missile sub had sunk in the Barents Sea after an explosion in the torpedo compartment.

Vlasov said, "With your submersible, no young man serving his country in any nation need die such a horrible death. Thanks to the ingenuity of NUMA, we have a way to get into a sunken vessel whether the escape hatch is operable or accessible, or not. The inno- vations you came up with for this vehicle are revolutionary."

"That's kind of you to say, Commander Vlasov. Joe deserves the credit for hammering some odds and ends together and applying good old American common sense."

"Thanks for the praise, but I stole the idea from Mother Nature," Zavala said with typical modesty. A graduate in marine engineering from the New York Maritime College, Zavala possessed a brilliant mechanical mind. He'd been recruited by NUMA Director James Sandecker right out of college, and in addition to his duties on the Special Assignments Team led by Austin, he had designed numer- ous manned and unmanned underwater vehicles.

"Nonsense!" Vlasov said. "It's a long way from the lamprey eel to your submersible."

"The principle's the same," Zavala said. "Lampreys are superbly engineered creatures. They latch on to a moving fish, sink their ring of teeth into the skin and suck the blood out of it. We use suction and lasers rather than teeth. The main problem was coming up with a flexible watertight seal that would attach to any surface and allow us to make the cut. With the use of space-age materials and computers, we put together a pretty good package."

Vlasov raised his vodka glass again. "I hold the proof of your in- genuity in my hand. When will the Sea Lamprey be fully operational?" "Soon." Zavala said. "I hope."

"The sooner the better. I shudder to think of the potential for dis- aster. The Soviets built some magnificent boats. But my countrymen have always leaned toward gigantism over quality." Vlasov finished his drink and rose from his chair. "Now I must go back to my cabin to prepare a report for my superiors. They should be very pleased. I'm grateful for all your hard work. I will thank Admiral Sandecker per- sonally."

As Vlasov left, one of the ship's officers came into the room and told Austin he had a telephone call. Austin picked up the telephone,

listened a few moments, asked some questions, then said, "Stand by. I'll get right back to you."

He hung up and said, "That was NATO's East Atlantic subma- rine disaster office. They need our help on a rescue mission." "Someone's lost a sub?" Zavala said.

"A Danish cruiser went down off the Faroe Islands, and some of the crew were trapped inside. They're still alive, apparently. The Swedes and the Brits are on

their way, but the cruiser doesn't have an escape hatch. The Danes need someone who can go directly through the hull and get the guys out. They heard we were out here making test dives."

"How long do we have?" "A few hours, the way they tell it."

Zavala shook his head. "The Faroes must be more than a thousand miles from here. The Beebe is a fast ship for her size, but she'd need wings to get there in time."

Austin thought about it a minute, then said, "You're a genius." "Glad you finally realized it. Mind telling me how you came to that conclusion? It would make a great pick-up line in a bar."

"First, let me ask: Is the Sea Lamprey in any shape to use on a real- life rescue operation? I detected a note ofCYA when Vlasov asked when it would be ready."

"We civil service types automatically take Cover Your Ass 101 when we sign on," Zavala said.

"You must have passed the course with flying colors. Well?" Zavala pondered the question for a moment. "You saw how she handled coming up."

"Sure, like a Brahma bull, but we made it okay. You'd pay big bucks for a ride like that at Disney World."

Zavala slowly shook his head. "You do have a talent for present- ing the possibility of a horrible death in a lighthearted way."

"My death wish isn't any stronger than yours. You told me the Sea Lamprey is built like a brick outhouse."

"Okay, I was bragging. Structurally, she's extremely sound. Op- erationally, she could do better."

"On balance, how do the odds of a successful mission stack up?"

"About fifty-fifty. I can jury-rig some repairs to increase the odds slightly in our favor."

"I'm not pushing you, Joe."

"You don't have to. I'd never sleep again if we didn't try to help these guys. But we've still got to get the submersible to that Danish cruiser. You've figured it out, haven't you, you old fox?" Zavala said, noting Austin's grin.

Maybe," Austin replied. "I've got a few details to work through with Vlasov."

Since I'm about to risk my life on a typical spur-of-the-moment Austin scheme, I wonder if you could tell me whats cooking under that prematurely silver-gray hair of yours?"

-Not at all/5 Austm said. "Do you recall what Vlasov said about Soviet gigantism?"

"Yeah, but-" "Think - Austin said, heading for the door. -Think real big."

4

KARL BECKER RESTLESSLY paced the deck of the Dan- ish research vessel Thor. Shoulders hunched, hands thrust into the pockets of his great coat, the navy bureaucrat looked like a large wingless bird. Becker wore several layers of clothing, yet he shivered as his thoughts went back to the collision. He had been shoved into a lifeboat, only to be thrown into the freezing water when the over-loaded craft capsized during launch. If a Faroese trawler had not plucked his semiconscious body to safety, he would have been dead within minutes.

He stopped to light a cigarette, cupping his hands around the name, and leaned on the rail. As he stared bleakly at the red plastic sphere that marked the grave of the sunken cruiser, he heard his name being called. The Thor's captain, Nils Larsen, was striding across the deck in his direction.

Where are those damned Americans?" Becker growled.

"Good news. They just called," said the captain. "They expect to be here in five minutes."

"About time, Becker said.

Like his colleague on the LeifErifsson, Captain Larsen was tall and blond with a

craggy profile. "In all fairness," he said, "it's only been a matter of hours since the cruiser went down. The NATO response team needed a minimum of seventy-two hours to place a mother ship, crew and rescue vehicle on site. The NUMA people have lived up to their pledge to get here within eight hours. They deserve some lee- way."

"I know, I know," Becker said, more in exasperation than anger. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, but every minute counts." He flicked the cigarette butt into the sea and jammed his hands even further into his pockets. "Too bad Denmark no longer has capital punishment," he fumed. "I'd like to see that whole murderous SOS bunch swing- ing from the end of a rope."

"You're sure they deliberately rammed you?"

"No doubt of it! They changed course and came directly at us. Bang! Like a torpedo." He glanced at his watch. "You're sure the Americans said five minutes? I don't see any ships approaching."

"That is puzzling," the captain said. He raised his binoculars and scanned the horizon. "I don't see any vessels, either." Hearing a noise, he pointed the lenses toward the overcast sky. "Wait. There's a heli- copter coming this way. It's moving very fast."

The pencil-point speck grew rapidly larger against the slate-gray cloud cover, and before long the thrump-thrump of rotors was audi- ble. The aircraft made directly for the Thor and buzzed the ship slightly higher than mast-level, then it banked and went into a wide circle around the research vessel. The letters NUMA were clearly visible in big bold letters on the side of the turquoise Bell 212.

The ship's first mate trotted across the deck toward the captain and pointed to the circling chopper. "It's the Americans. They're asking permission to land."

The captain replied in the affirmative, and the crewman relayed the okay into a squawking hand radio. The helicopter swooped in, hovered above the stern deck and descended in slow motion, mak- ing a gentle landing at the exact center of the white circle that marked the helipad.

The door flew open, and two men emerged under the spinning ro- tors and made their way across the deck. As a politician, Becker was an acute observer of

people. The men moved with the casual easiness that he had seen in other Americans, but their determined stride and the way they carried themselves projected an air of supreme confi- dence.

The broad-shouldered man leading the way was just over six feet tall and around two hundred pounds, Becker estimated. His hair was gray, but as the man drew near, Becker saw that he was young, probably around forty. His dark-complexioned companion was slightly shorter, younger and slimmer. He walked with the panther- like grace of a boxer; it would not have surprised Becker if he'd known that the man had financed his way through college fighting as a middleweight. His movements were relaxed, but with the in- herent energy of a coiled spring.

The captain stepped forward to greet the Americans. "Welcome to the Thor/' he said.

"Thanks. I'm Kurt Austin from the National Underwater and Marine Agency," said the husky man, who looked as if he could walk through a wall. "And this is my partner, Joe Zavala." He shook hands Wth the captain, then Becker, almost bringing tears to the Dane's eyes Wth a crushing handshake. Zavala pulverized those bones Austin had missed.

You made good time," the captain said.

"We're a few minutes behind schedule," Austin said. "The logis- tics were somewhat complicated."

"That's all right. Thank God you came!" Becker said, rubbing his hand. He glanced toward the helicopter. "Where's the rescue team?"

Austin and Zavala exchanged an amused glance. "You're looking at it," Austin said.

Becker's astonishment gave way to barely restrained fury. He whirled around to face the captain. "How in God's name are these two... gentlemen going to rescue Captain Petersen and his men?"

Captain Larsen was wondering the same thing, but was more re- served. "I suggest you ask them," he replied, with obvious embar- rassment at Becker's outburst.

"Well?" Becker said, glaring first at Austin, then at Zavala. Becker could not have known that the two men who had stepped off the helicopter equaled a shipload of rescuers. Born in Seattle, Austin had been raised in and around the sea, which was not sur- prising, since his father was the owner of a marine salvage company. While studying for his master's degree in systems management at the University of Washington, he'd attended a highly rated Seattle dive school, where he'd attained proficiency in a number of specialized areas. He'd put his expertise to work on North Sea oil rigs, had worked for his father awhile, then had been hired by the CIA to conduct underwater intelligence. When the Cold War ended, he'd been recruited by Sandecker to head the Special Assignments Team.

Zavala was the son of Mexican parents who had waded across the Rio Grande, settling in Santa Fe. His oil-stained mechanical genius was the stuff of legend around the halls ofNUMA, and he could re- pair, modify or restore any kind of engine ever devised. He had spent thousands of hours as a pilot in helicopters and small jet and turbo- prop craft. His assignment to Austin's team had proved a fortunate pairing. Many of their assignments would never become public knowledge, but their wisecracking camaraderie in the face ofdan- aer masked a steely determination and a competence few could rival.

Austin calmly regarded Becker with piercing blue-green eyes the color of coral under water. He was not unsympathetic to Becker's plight and deflected the Dane's fury with a broad smile. "Sorry for being flip. I should have explained immediately that the rescue ve- hicle is on its way."

"Should be here in about an hour," Zavala added.

"There's a lot we can do in the meantime," Austin said. He turned to the captain. "I need help unloading a piece of equipment from the chopper. Can you spare a few men with strong backs?"

"Yes, of course." The captain was relieved to be doing something at last. Moving with crisp efficiency, he dispatched his first mate to round up the work detail.

At Austin's direction, the grunting crewmen lifted a large wooden crate from the helicopter's storage compartment and set it down on the deck. Using a crowbar from the helicopter, Austin pried the top off the box and peered inside. After a quick inspection, he said, "Everything looks shipshape. What's the latest on the

situation?"

Captain Larsen pointed to the bobbing buoy that marked the sunken cruiser. While Austin and Zavala listened intently, Larsen provided a quick summary of the collision and sinking.

It doesn't make sense," Austin said. "From what you say, they had plenty of sea room."

So did theAndrea Doria and the Stockholm/' Zavala said, refer- ring to the disastrous sea collision off Nantucket.

Becker mumbled something about SOS criminals, but Austin ig- nored him and concentrated on the business at hand. "What makes you so sure the captain and his men are still alive?"

We were doing a whale population survey not far from here when we got the call for help," Larsen said. "We dropped a hy- drophone over the side and picked up the sound of someone tapping an SOS on the hull in Morse code. Unfortunately, we can only re- ceive, not send, messages. However, we determined that there were thirteen men, including Captain Andersen, trapped in a pocket of air in the forward bunkroom. The air is foul, and they were in the early stages of hypothermia."

"When did you last hear from them?"

"About two hours ago. It was essentially the same message, only

the tapping has become much fainter. Toward the end, they tapped out the same word over and over." "What was it?"

Desperate.

Austin broke the grim silence that followed. "Did you get any other equipment down to the ship?"

"The Faroese Coast Guard called the NATO base on Stremoy. They contacted the NATO submarine rescue network minutes after the cruiser went down. Those ships you see out there are mostly from Scandinavian countries. We've been acting as the interim mother ship. A Swedish vessel should arrive soon with a

rescue ve- hicle, but like the others, it's useless in this situation. It's set up to rescue men through a submarine rescue hatch. We've been able to pinpoint the cruiser's location two-hundred-sixty feet down, but be- yond that, for all our technical ability, we're only spectators at a dis- aster in the making."

"Not necessarily," Austin said.

"Then you think you can help?" Becker said with pleading eyes.

"Maybe," Austin said. "We can say better after we see what we're up against."

Becker apologized for his earlier abruptness. "Sorry I flew off the handle. We're grateful for your offer to help. I owe a special debt to Captain Petersen. After we were hit and there was no doubt the cruiser would sink within minutes, he made sure I had a place in a lifeboat. When he learned others were still below, he rushed off to help them and must have been trapped when the ship sank."

"He's a brave man. All the more reason for saving him and his crew," Austin said. "Do you have any idea of the ship's position on the bottom?"

"Yes, of course. Come with me," the captain said. He led the way

to an electronics lab off the main deck. The room was equipped with computer monitors used for remote sensing projects. "This is a high- resolution sonar picture of the LeifErifyson," he said, indicating the image on a large monitor. "As you can see, she is lying at a slight angle on an inclined slope. The crews' quarters are here, one deck below the mess area, a short distance back from the bow. Obviously, air was trapped here." He circled a section of hull with the cursor. "It's a miracle they're still alive."

"It's a miracle they may wish never happened," Becker observed glumly.

"Tell us about the compartment."

"It's quite large. There are bunks for two dozen crewmen. It's reached by a single companionway through the mess hall. There is also an emergency hatch."

"We'll need specific details about the bunkroom, particularly the location of pipes, conduits and structural supports."

The captain handed over a file. "The navy department faxed this material to us in anticipation of the rescue attempt. I think you'll find everything you need. If not, we can get it to you quickly."

Austin and Zavala studied the ship's schematic layouts, then went back to the sonar image. "There's only so much we can learn from pictures," Austin said finally. "Maybe it's time I went for a swim."

"Good thing you brought your swimsuit," Zavala said.

"It's the new Michelin model. Guaranteed to wow the ladies."

Becker and the captain wondered if they had stumbled into the company of madmen. They exchanged puzzled glances, then hurried to keep up with the NUMA men. While Zavala sketched out their strategy for Captain Larsen and Becker, Austin supervised the four strapping crewmen as they moved the crate until it was under a boom. They unwound cable from the crane, then Austin ran it into the big box and gave the signal to start the hoist.

The bright-yellow figure that rose from the crate was nearly seven feet tall and looked like a robot in a fifties sci-fi film. The cast alu- minum arms and legs did indeed bulge like those of the Michelin Man, and the helmet resembled an oversized fishbowl. The arms ended in pincers like those of an insect. Four small fans protected by circular housings projected from the elbows and the back of the arms.

Austin rapped his knuckles against the unit pack attached to the figure's back. "This is the latest in Hardsuit technology. This model can operate at depths of two thousand feet for up to six hours, so I'll have plenty of leeway. Mind if I borrow a short ladder? I'll need an experienced boat crew in the water, too."

The captain dispatched his first mate to carry out the requests. Austin stripped off his windbreaker, pulled a heavy wool sweater over his turtleneck jersey, and yanked a black navy watch cap down over his ears. The suit broke at the waist into two sections. Austin climbed the ladder and eased his body into the bottom pod. Then the top section was attached, the lifting line attached, and the boom slowly lifted him off the deck.

Using the suit's radio, which was the same frequency as the ship's handsets, he called a halt when he was a few feet above the deck. He moved his arms and

legs, aided by sixteen hydraulically compen- sated rotary joints. Then he tried out the manually operated manip- ulators at the end of each hand pod. Finally, he tried the foot-pad controls and listened to the whirr of the vertical and horizontal thrusters.

"All systems go," Austin said.

The atmospheric diving suit, or ADS, had been developed to pro- tect divers from intense ocean pressures while allowing them to carry out tasks of relative delicacy. Despite its humanoid shape, the Hard- suit was considered a vehicle and the diver referred to as its pilot.

With Zavala supervising the operation, the boom pivoted over the water. Austin swung back and forth like a yo-yo at the end of its swing. Seeing that the launch crew had its boat in the water, he said, "Lower away."

The cable paid out and Austin dropped into the heaving swells. Green froth surged over his helmet. The boat crew detached the cable fastening, and Austin sank like a stone for several fathoms, until he adjusted the suit to neutral buoyancy. Then he played with the thrusters, moving up, down, back and forward, then into a hover. He took a last look at the pale surface glimmering above him, switched on the lights on the chest section, mashed the vertical con- trol pad and began his descent.

5

UNAWARE OF THE events unfolding more than two hun- dred feet above his head, Captain Petersen lay in his bunk and stared into the darkness, wondering whether he would freeze to death or suffocate first from lack of oxygen. It was purely an intel- lectual exercise. He was beyond caring how the end came. He only hoped that it arrived soon.

The cold had drained most of his energy. Every labored breath of carbon dioxide that he and his crew exhaled made the air less able to sustain life. The captain was drifting off into the comatose state that comes when the will to live ebbs like the lowering tide. Even thoughts of his wife and children could not pull him back.

He longed to reach the numb stage that might cushion his aches and pains. His body still harbored enough life to sustain his misery. His tortured lungs launched

into a coughing fit that triggered a throbbing in his left arm, broken when he'd been thrown against a bulkhead. It was a simple fracture, but it hurt like hell. The groans of his crewmen reminded Petersen that he was not alone in his discomfort.

As he had a dozen times already, the captain ran through the col- lision in his mind, and wondered if he could have avoided it. All had been going well. A dangerous confrontation had been avoided, and the Sea Sentinel was being escorted out to sea. Then without warn- ing, that crazy circus-painted ship had veered toward the cruiser's ex- posed side.

His frantic order to bear off had come too late. The tortured sound of tearing steel had told him that the wound was fatal. His naval training had quickly come into play. He'd given the order to aban- don ship and had been supervising the launch of the lifeboats when a sailor ran up and said that men were injured below decks. Petersen hadn't hesitated. He'd left the lifeboat launch in the hands of his first mate and hurried to aid his men.

The night watch had been asleep when the LeifErilsson was hit. The Sea Sentinel's bow had penetrated the hull behind the sleeping quarters, sparing the crew from instant death but injuring some men. Petersen dashed into the mess hall, then half-tumbled down the companionway and saw that the uninjured were tending to their comrades.

"Abandon ship!" he ordered. "Form human stretchers."

The ship was sinking at a stern-down angle from the weight of the sea that poured in through the gaping hole. Water flowed into the mess hall, then down through the open hatch into the bunkroom, cut- ting off escape. Petersen climbed partway up the ladder, slammed the hatch shut and spun the wheel that locked it tight. Then the ship lurched as he was descending, and he slammed against the bulk- head, losing consciousness.

It was a fortunate accident because he didn't hear the horrible moans and creaks the ship made on its fatal plunge to the bottom. And his limp body wasn't further injured when, moments later, the cruiser slammed into the soft mud. Even so, when the captain awoke in the darkened cabin, it was to an even more terrible sound, the cries of his men. Soon after he regained consciousness, a beam of light had stabbed the darkness and revealed bloodied and pale faces among the

jumbled bunks and sea chests. The ship's chef, a short, round man named Lars, called the captain's name.

"Over here," Petersen croaked.

The flickering light came his way. Lars crawled up beside Pe- tersen holding an electric torch.

"Are you all right, Lars?" the captain asked.

"Some bumps and bruises. My fat protected me. How about you, sir?"

Petersen managed a wet laugh. "I'm not so lucky. Broken left arm.

'What happened. Captain? I was sleeping." 'A ship slammed into us."

"Damn," Lars said. "I was having a sweet dream of good things to eat before I got tossed from my bunk. Didn't expect to see you down here, sir."

"One of the crew said you were in trouble. I came to help." He struggled to get up. "I'm not much help sitting here. Can you give me a hand ?"

They fashioned an improvised sling from the captain's belt and went around the cabin. With the help of a few men who hadn't been severely injured, they tried to make those less fortunate comfortable. The damp, biting cold was the worst immediate danger. They might be able to buy time, Petersen thought. The bunkroom had a supply of immersion suits used for cold-water protection if the ship went down.

It took awhile to round up the suits, which were scattered through- out the cabin in bags, and to get the injured men into them. They slipped on their gloves and pulled down the hoods. Then they rounded up spare blankets and clothes and wrapped themselves in several layers.

With the cold temporarily held at bay, Petersen turned his efforts to the air problem. One of the aluminum lockers held breathing de- vices to be used in case of fire or other emergency. These were passed around. They, too, would buy time. Petersen decided to use up their canned air first because it was purer than the air in the cabin, which was making the men sick.

Petersen formed tapping crews for the same reason POW officers allocate duties to maintain morale. The men took turns using a wrench to rap SOS on the hull. As one man after another tired of the job, Petersen continued to tap away, although he wasn't sure why. Bored with the SOS, he began tapping out messages describing their plight. Eventually, he tired and rapped the bulkhead whenever strength allowed, which wasn't often. Then he stopped altogether. His thoughts turned from rescue, he shut his eyes, and once more he began to think of death.

Using the marker buoy line as his guide, Austin sank into the depths feet-first and slightly angled forward, like an old hard-hat diver being lowered at the end of an invisible air hose. Dancing rainbow shafts lanced the water like sunlight streaming through stain-glass windows. As Austin plunged deeper, the water filtered out the col- ors and the twilight abruptly turned into a violet night.

The powerful halogen lights mounted on the front of the Hard- suit caught snowy motes of marine vegetation and nervous schools offish in their beams, but before long, Austin was dropping into the benthic levels, where only the hardiest offish lived. At two hundred feet, his lights pick out the cruiser's masts and antennas, then the ship's ghostly contours materialized.

Austin hit the vertical thrusters and slowed to a stop at deck level. Then the horizontal thrusters whirred, and he cruised along the hull, rounded the stern and came back to the bow. The ship lay as shown in the sonar picture, at a slight angle on the slope, with the bow higher than the stern. He studied the ship with the intensity of a medical examiner inspecting the autopsied body of a murder victim, paying particular attention to the triangular gash in the side. No vessel could have survived the giant bayonet wound.

Seeing only twisted metal beyond the jagged opening, he moved toward the bow again. He approached within inches of the hull, feel- ing as dwarfed as a fly on a wall, leaned his helmet against the steel plating and listened. The only sounds were the hollow noise of his breathing and the whirr of thrusters as they kept the suit at a hover. Austin pushed off several feet, came around, goosed the horizontal thrusters and let his metal knees slam into the ship.

On the other side of the hull, Petersen's half-closed eyes blinked fully open. He held his breath.

"What was that?" a hoarse voice said in the darkness. Lars had been huddled on the bunk next to the captain's.

"Thank God you heard it, too/' Petersen whispered. "I thought I was going mad. Listen."

They strained their ears and heard tapping on the outside of the hull. Morse code. Slow and measured, as if the sender were struggling with each letter. The captain's eyes widened like those of a cartoon character, as he translated the rough taps into letters.

P-E-T-E...

Austin was cursing the awkwardness of communicating. At his di- rection, one of the crew had attached a specially adapted ball-peen hammer to his right hand manipulator. The mechanical arm moved with agonizing slowness, but by concentrating all his resources, he finished tapping out one word in Morse code.

...ERSEN

He stopped and put his helmet against the hull. After a moment, he heard dots and dashes clunked out in reply.

YES

STATUS

AIR BAD COLD

HELP SOON

A pause. Then, HURRY

SOON

Petersen called out to his men that rescue was imminent. He felt guilty lying. Their time was about to run out. He was having a prob- lem focusing. It was getting harder to breathe, and soon it would be impossible. The temperature had plunged to below zero, and even the immersion suit couldn't keep out the cold. He had stopped shiv- ering, the first sign of hypothermia.

Lars interrupted Petersen's drifting thoughts. "Captain, can I ask you a question?"

Petersen grunted in the affirmative.

"Why the hell did you come back, sir? You could have saved your- self."

Petersen said, "I heard somewhere a captain is supposed to go down with his ship."

"This is about as far down as you can go, Captain." Petersen made a gargling sound that was as close to laughter as he could muster. Lars did the same, but their strength soon left them. They made themselves as comfortable as they could and waited.

6

THE BOAT CREW was watching for Austin to pop out of the

water, and they snagged him like a runaway calf. Within min- utes, he was back on the deck, where he spelled out the situation to Becker and Captain Larsen.

"Dear God," Becker said. "What a terrible way to die. My govern- ment will spare no expense to retrieve their bodies for the families."

Becker's pessimism was starting to annoy Austin. "Please stop playing the role of the melancholy Dane, Mr. Becker. Your govern- ment can hold on to its wallet. Those men aren't dead yet."

"But you said-"

"I fylow what I said. They're in tough shape, but that doesn't mean they're doomed. The Squalus submarine rescue took more than a day to accomplish, and thirty-three were saved." Austin paused as his sharp ears picked up a new sound. He stared at the sky and shaded his eyes against the glare of the overcast.

"Looks like the cavalry has arrived."

A gigantic helicopter was bearing down on the ship. Dangling below the

helicopter in a sling was a blimp-shaped submarine with a blunt nose.

'That's the largest helicopter I've ever seen," Captain Larsen said. 'Actually, the Mi-26 is the biggest helicopter in the world,)) Austin said. "It's more than a hundred feet long. They call it the flying crane.

Becker smiled for the first time in hours. "Please tell me that strange-looking object hanging below the helicopter is your rescue vehicle."

"The Sea Lamprey isn't the prettiest craft in the sea," Zavala said with a shrug. "I sacrificed form for function in designing her."

"To the contrary," Becker said. "She's beautiful"

The captain shook his head in wonderment. "How on earth did you get this equipment here so quickly? You were twelve hundred miles away when the rescue call went out."

"We remembered that the Russians like to do things in a big way," Austin said. "They jumped at the chance to show the world they're still a first-rate nation."

"But that helicopter couldn't have carried it all that way in such a short time. You gentlemen must be magicians."

"It took a lot of work to pull this rabbit out of a hat," Austin said, as he watched the helicopter maneuver. "The Mi-26 picked up the submersible at sea and transferred it to a land base, where two Antonov N-124 heavy-duty transport planes were waiting. The Sea Lamprey went on one plane. The big chopper and the NUMA heli- copter were loaded on the other. It was a two-hour flight to the NATO base in the Faroes. While they unloaded the submersible and got it ready to fly, we came out here to prepare the way."

The powerful turboshaft engines drowned out the captain's reply as the aircraft moved closer and hovered. The eight rotor blades and five-bladed tail rotor threshed the air, and the downdraft they cre- ated scooped a vast watery crater out of the sea. The submersible was released a few feet above the roiling water, and the helicopter moved off. The Sea Lamprey had been fitted out with large air-filled pontoons. It sank beneath the waves, but quickly bobbed back to the surface.

Austin suggested that the captain ready the sick bay to treat ex- treme hypothermia. Then the boat crew ferried them out to the sub- mersible. The launch crew detached the pontoons. The submersible blew air from its ballast tanks and sank below the blue-black surface.

The Sea Lamprey hovered, kept at an even keel by its thrusters. Austin and Zavala sat in the snug cockpit, their faces washed by the blue light from the instrument panel, and ran down the dive check- list. Then Zavala pushed the control stick forward, angled the blunt prow down and blew ballast. He steered the submersible in a de- scending spiral as casually as if he were taking the family out on a Sunday drive.

Austin peered into the gauzy bluish blackness beyond the range of the lights. "I didn't have time to ask you before we came aboard," he said, almost in afterthought. "Is this thing safe?"

"As a former president once said, 'Depends on your definition ofis/"

Austin groaned. "Let me rephrase my question. Are the leaks and the pump fixed?"

"I think I stopped up the leaks, and the ballast pump works well under ideal conditions."

"What about actual conditions?" "Kurt, my father used to quote an old Spanish proverb. 'The closed mouth swallows no flies.' "

"What the hell do flies have to do with our situation?"

"Nothing," Zavala said. "I just thought we should change the sub- ject. Maybe the problem with the ballast control will go away."

The vehicle had been built as a rescue system of last resort. Once its lasers punched a hole in a sunken vessel, water would rush in after the sub disengaged. There was no way to plug the opening. All trapped crewmen had to be evacuated in one trip. This was a proto- type, built to carry only eight people plus a pilot and co-pilot. If all thirteen men and their captain were taken off the cruiser, they'd be over the weight limit by six.

Austin said, "I've been running the figures in my head. Estimate a hundred-fifty

pounds per man, and we've got more than a ton of weight. There's a safety margin built into the Lamprey, so it's prob- ably no big whoop, except for the lame ballast tank."

"No problem. We've got a backup pump if the main isn't work- ing." In designing the Sea Lamprey, Zavala had followed common

practice and built redundant systems. Zavala paused. "Some of the crew might be dead."

"I've been thinking about that," Austin said. "We'd increase our safety margin if we left bodies down there, but I'm not leaving until we've got every man aboard. Dead or alive."

The cockpit grew silent as both men considered the awful possi- bilities. The only sound was the hum of electric motors as the un- gainly craft dropped into the depths. Before long, they were at the side of the cruiser. Austin directed Zavala to the penetration point. Then came a soft clunk as the front end of the submersible bumped the curved steel plates. Electric pump motors hummed, and the sub- mersible stayed where it was, glued to the steel by a vacuum.

The escape tunnel, made of a tough but pliable synthetic material, was extended. Eight vertical and horizontal thrusters kept the vehi- cle steady under the direction of computers that monitored its move- ment in relation to the current. The instruments indicated when the seal was complete. Normally, a thin probe would penetrate the hull to look for explosive fumes.

Sensors gauged the pressure within the seal and kept the vacuum on place. Given the safe signal to enter, Austin strapped on a small air tank and a scuba regulator and emerged from the air lock. There was some leakage around the seal, but not enough to worry about. He started to crawl through the escape tunnel.

Inside the cruiser, the crew and captain had slipped into a deathlike sleep. Captain Petersen was roused from his cold slumber by the sound of a giant woodpecker. Damned bird! While one level of his brain cursed the source of the noise, another was automatically ana- lyzing it, grouping the raps into familiar patterns, each the equiva- lent of a letter.

HELLO

He flicked the torch on. The chef had heard the noise, and his eyes were as big as fried eggs. The captain's stiff fingers groped for the wrench by his side and banged it weakly against the hull. Then again, with more force.

The reply was immediate.

MOVE AWAY

More easily said than done, the captain thought. Petersen told the chef to back off from the bulkhead, then followed, rolling out of his bunk. He crawled across the deck and called out to the other men to move. He sat with his back to a locker for what seemed an eternity, not sure what to expect.

Austin crawled back into the Lamprey. "Mission accomplished," he said.

"Turning on the can opener," Zavala said. He hit the switch for the ring of cutting lasers. They sliced through the two-inch metal skin as easily as a paring knife through an orange. A monitor showed the penetration and the brilliant red of the lasers. The lasers automati- cally shut off.

Petersen had been watching as a faint pink circle deepened in color until it was a bright molten reddish-orange. He felt welcome heat against his face. There was a hollow clang as a section of the hull fell into the cabin, and he had to shield his eyes against a bright disk of light.

Steam filled the escape tunnel, and the edges of the opening were still hot from the laser cutters. Austin pushed a specially made lad- der over the rim and stuck his head through the opening.

"Any of you gentlemen call a taxi?" he said.

Despite his lighthearted manner, Austin wondered if the rescue was too late. He had never seen such a bedraggled bunch. He called out for Captain Petersen. A grease-covered apparition crawled for- ward and croaked, "I'm the captain. Who are you?"

Austin climbed into the ship and helped the captain to his feet. "The introductions will have to wait. Please tell your men who can still move to crawl through that hole."

The captain translated the order. Austin threw a couple of soggy blankets onto the rough edges of the opening, then helped those who couldn't make it under their own power. Petersen collapsed as he was trying to crawl into the submersible, and Austin had to give him a shove, then clambered in behind him. As he entered the air lock, he saw water trickling in through the rim of the seal where Zavala had done a hasty patch job.

He quickly closed the hatch behind him. Zavala had put the con- trols on auto while he pulled the crew through the air lock. The bulky survival suits didn't make the task any easier. It was a miracle that any of the crew was still alive. Amazingly, some had made the trip themselves. The passenger space consisted of two padded benches running the length of the sub, separated by a narrow aisle. The survivors crowded onto the benches or stood in the aisle like commuters on a Tokyo subway.

"Sorry there's no first-class section," Austin said.

"No complaint," said the captain. "My men will agree that it is bet- ter than our former living arrangements."

With the crew settled, Kurt returned to the cockpit. "We had a lit- tle leakage around the seal," he reported.

Zavala indicated a blinking light on a computer-generated dia- gram of the submersible. "More than a little. The 0-ring blew out like a flat tire a second after we closed the air lock."

He retracted the telescopic escape tube, disengaged the sub- mersible from the dead ship and backed off, clearly revealing in its floodlights the round hole where the lasers had cut out the escape route. When the sub was clear of the wreck, he activated the ballast pumps. The electric motors clicked into action with a low hum, ex- cept from the front right pump, where there was a sound like a fork going down a garbage disposal. One ballast tank still had water in it, disrupting the sub's equilibrium as the others filled with com- pressed air.

The Sea Lamprey operated like any other submarine; it pumped water into its ballast tanks to dive, pumped in air to ascend. The computer tried to compensate by giving more power to the vertical thrusters. The submersible lurched into a nose-down angle, and the smell of hot metal came through the vents. Zavala pumped water back into the other tanks, and the Lamprey leveled out, more or

less.

Austin stared at the instrument panel. A light was blinking on a schematic troubleshooting diagram. He ran a check on the computer that served as the brains of the vehicle. The trouble system indicated that the warning light had been triggered by an actual mechanical problem, the kind of glitch that could show up with new equipment, and was probably easily repairable. But this was not a test run; it was a deep submergence dive to fifty fathoms. Another light started blinking red.

"Both front motors are gone," Austin said. "Better use the backup pumps."

"Those were the backup pumps," Zavala said.

"So much for redundant systems. What's the problem?"

"I could tell you in a minute if I had this thing up on a lift."

"I don't see any garages nearby, and in any case, I forgot my credit card."

"As my father used to say, 'All it takes to move a stubborn burro is a stick of dynamite.5 " Zavala said.

Around the halls ofNUMA, Austin had a well-deserved reputa- tion for having an unflappable stubbornness in the face of adversity. Most men wisely cut and run in the face of sure disaster; Austin faced it with equanimity. The fact that he was still alive and breathing showed that he possessed a remarkable combination of resourceful- ness and luck. Those who'd had to tough it out with him found his serendipity frightening. Austin always shrugged off their complaints. But now, Joe was giving him a taste of his own medicine. Austin compressed his lips in a tight smile, laced his fingers behind his head and sat back in his seat.

"You wouldn't be so relaxed if you didn't have a plan," Austin said.

Zavala gave his partner an exaggerated wink and removed the two-pronged key that had been hanging from a chain around his neck. He flipped open a small metal cap in the center of the console and inserted the key. "When I turn this key and flick the little switch next to it, the third redundant system comes into play. Explosive charges will blow off all the ballast tanks, and up we go. Smart, eh?" "Not if the Thor is in the way when we come flying out of the

water. We'd sink the ship and us."

"If it makes you feel any better, press that button. It sends up a warning buoy to the surface. Flares, whistles. The whole nine yards."

Austin punched the button. There was a swoosh as the buoy was ejected from the sub. He advised their passengers to hold tight.

Zavala jerked his thumb skyward, a boyish grin on his face.

"Going up\" He hit the switch and they braced themselves. The only sound was Zavala swearing under his breath in Spanish. "The switch didn't work," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Let's see if I can summarize this. We're three hundred feet down, with overloaded capacity, the cabin full of half-dead sailors, and the panic button doesn't work."

"You have a knack for brevity, Kurt."

"Thanks. I'll expand further. We've got two front tanks full of water, two rear ones empty, and that spells neutral buoyancy. Any way of lightening the Lamprey?"

"I can jettison the connector tube. We'll get to the surface, but it won't be pretty."

"Doesn't seem we have much of an alternative. I'll tell our pas- sengers to hold on."

Austin made his announcement, buckled himself into his seat and gave the signal. Zavala crossed his fingers and blew off the rescue tube. It had been made detachable as a precaution, in case the sub- mersible had to extricate itself from a rescue in a hurry. There was a muffled explosion, and the submersible lurched. The Sea Lamprey rose a foot, then a yard, then several yards. Their progress was ex- cruciatingly slow at first, but the craft gained more speed the higher it went. Before long, it was speeding to the surface.

The Sea Lamprey exploded from the sea stern-first and splashed down in a fountain of white water. The vehicle rolled violently, toss- ing those inside

around like dice in a shaker. Alerted by the warning buoy's sound-and-light show, small boats dashed in and their crews attached pontoons that stabilized the craft in a more or less horizon- tal position.

The Thor got a line on the vehicle and hauled the Sea Lamprey close to where a crane could lift it to the deck. Medical personnel swarmed over the submersible the second the hatch was popped, and the sur- vivors were extracted one by one, loaded onto stretchers and hustled onto waiting MediVac helicopters that transferred them to the land hospital. By the time Austin and Zavala climbed from the sub- mersible, the deck was practically deserted, except for a handful of crew who came over and congratulated them, then quickly left.

Zavala looked around the near-empty deck. "No brass band?"

"Heroism is its own reward," Austin said pontifically. "But I wouldn't turn down a shot oftequila if someone offered it to me."

"What a coincidence. I just happen to have a bottle of blue agave tucked away in my duffel bag. Primo stuff."

"We may have to delay our celebration. Mr. Becker is coming our way."

The Danish bureaucrat was striding across the deck, his face beaming with unmistakable happiness. He pumped their hands, pounded the NUMA men on the back and showered them with ef- fusive praise.

"Gentlemen, I thank you," he said breathlessly. "Denmark thanks you. The world thanks you!"

"Our pleasure," Austin said. "Thanks for the opportunity to test the Sea Lamprey under actual conditions. The Russian chopper is at the NATO base with the transport planes. We'll give them a call, and we can be out of here in a few hours."

Becker's face reassumed its usual mask of businesslike dourness. "Mr. Zavala is free to go, but I'm afraid you might have to delay your trip. A special investigative court that was formed to look into the cruiser incident is convening a hearing in Torshavn tomorrow. They would like you to testify."

"Don't see how I can help. I didn't see the actual sinking."

"Yes, but you dove on the Eri/yson twice. You can describe the damage in detail. It will help make our case." Seeing the doubt in Austin's face, he said, "I'm afraid we'll have to insist that you be our guest in the Islands until the hearing is terminated. Cheer up. The U.S. embassy has been informed of our request and will transmit it to NUMA. I've already arranged lodging for you. We'll be staying in the same hotel, in fact. The Islands are beautiful, and you'll only be delayed a day or two before you can rejoin your ship."

"It's no problem for me, Kurt," Zavala said. "I can get the Lam- prey back to the Beebe and wrap up the tests."

Austin's eyes flashed with anger. He didn't like being told what to do by an officious little government drone. He made no effort to dis- guise the annoyance in his voice. "Looks like I'll be your guest, Mr. Becker." He turned to Zavala. "We'll have to put off our celebration. I'll call the NATO base and get things moving."

Before long, the engine roar of the huge Russian helicopter filled the air. The sling was attached under the Sea Lamprey's belly, and the helicopter lifted the vehicle from the ship's deck. Then Zavala took off in the NUMA helicopter and followed the submersible back to the base where the sub would be loaded onto a transport plane for the return trip.

"One other thing," Becker said. "I'd like you to keep that re- markable suit on board in case the court has the need for further ev- idence. If not, we'll gladly ship it anywhere you wish."

"You want me to make another dive?"

"Possibly. I would clear it with your superiors, of course."

"Of course," Austin said. He was too tired to argue.

The captain came over and announced that the shuttle was ready to take them back to the mainland. Austin wasn't enthusiastic about spending any more time than he had to with the Danish bureaucrat. "I'll come ashore tomorrow if it's all right with you. Captain Larsen wants to show me some of the results of his whale research."

The captain saw the desperation in Austin's eyes and played along. "Oh yes, as I said, you'll find our work fascinating. I'll deliver Mr. Austin to shore in the morning."

Becker shrugged. "Suit yourself I've spent enough time at sea to last me a lifetime."

Austin watched the shuttle boat head toward land and turned to the captain. "Thanks for rescuing me from Mr. Becker."

Larsen sighed heavily. "I suppose bureaucrats like Becker have a value in the scheme of things."

"So do the stomach bacteria that aid in digestion," Austin said.

The captain laughed and put his hand on Austin's shoulder. "I think a liquid celebration of your successful mission is in order."

"I think you're right," Austin said.

7

AUSTIN RECEIVED V IP treatment aboard the research ves- sel. After drinks in the captain's cabin, he enjoyed a delicious meal, then he was entertained with incredible underwater footage of the ship's whale research. He was given a comfortable cabin and slept like a log, and the next morning he said his farewell to Captain Larsen.

The captain seemed sorry to see him go. "We're going to be here a few days doing survey work on the cruiser. Let me know if there is anything I can ever do for you or for NUMA."

They shook hands and Austin climbed into the shuttle for the short trip to the Western Harbor. Happy to be on dry land once more after weeks on and under the sea, he made his way along the cob- blestone quay past the line of fishing boats. The capital city of the Faroe Islands was named Torshavn, "Thor's Harbor," after the mightiest of the Scandinavian gods. Despite its thundering namesake, Torshavn was a quiet settlement located on a headland between two busy boat harbors.

Austin would have preferred to explore the narrow streets that ran between the colorful old houses, but a glance at his watch told him he had better get moving if he wanted to make the hearing. He dropped his duffel bag off at the hotel room that Becker had arranged for him. He figured he wouldn't be in the Faroes more than another day or so, and decided to leave whether Becker wanted him to or not. On his way out, he asked the desk to book him a flight to Copen- hagen in two days.

His destination was a short walk up the hill toward Vaglio Square in the heart of the city's commercial center. A few minutes later, he stopped in front of an impressive nineteenth-century building built ofdark-hued basalt. The plaque on the exterior identified the struc- ture as the Raohus, or Town Hall. He mentally girded his loins for the ordeal ahead. As an employee of a federal agency, Austin was no stranger to the hazards of navigating governmental seas. The rescue of the men trapped in the LeifErisson might have been the easiest part of his Faroese adventure, he reflected.

The receptionist in the Raohus lobby told Austin how to get to the hearing room. He followed a corridor to a door guarded by a burly policeman and identified himself. The officer told him to wait and slipped into the room. He reappeared a moment later with Becker. Taking Austin by the arm, Becker moved out of earshot.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Austin." He glanced at the policeman and lowered his voice. "This matter requires a great deal of delicacy. Do you know anything about the Faroe Islands government?"

"Only that there's an affiliation with Denmark. I don't know the details."

"Correct. The Islands are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but they have had home rule since 1948. They're quite independent, even keeping their own language. However, when they get into financial trouble, they don't hesitate to ask Copenhagen for money," he said, with a faint smile. "This incident occurred in Faroese waters, but a

Danish warship was involved."

"Which means SOS wouldn't win any popularity contests in Den- mark."

Becker brushed off his comment with an airy wave. "I've made my feelings

clear. Those crazy people should be hanged for sinking our ship. But I am a realist. The whole regrettable incident would never have happened if it hadn't been for the Islanders' stubbornness in keeping their old customs."

"You mean the whale hunt?"

"I won't comment on the morality of the grindarap. Many in Den- mark regard the grind as a barbaric and unnecessary ritual. More important are the economic considerations. Companies that might buy Faroese fish or explore for oil don't want the public to think they are doing business with whale murderers. When the Faroese can't pay their bills, Copenhagen must open its pocketbook."

"So much for independence."

Becker smiled again. "The Danish government wants to resolve this case quickly, with the minimum amount of international pub- licity. We don't want these SOS people seen as courageous martyrs who acted rashly but in defense of helpless creatures."

"What do you want from me?"

"Please go beyond your technical observations in your testimony. We know what sank the cruiser. Feel free to emphasize the human suffering you witnessed. Our goal is to convict Ryan in the court of public opinion, then get these reckless hooligans out of our country and make sure they don't come back. We want to make sure that the world sees them as pariahs rather than martyrs. Perhaps then, some- thing like this won't happen again."

"Suppose Ryan is innocent in all this?"

"His innocence or guilt is of no concern to my government. There are greater issues at stake."

"As you say, a matter of great delicacy. I'll tell your people what I saw. That's all I can promise.

Becker nodded. "Fair enough. Shall we go in?"

The policeman opened the door, and Becker and Austin stepped inside the hearing room. Austin's eyes swept around the large dark- paneled chamber and

took in the suits, presumably government and legal people, who filled several rows of chairs. He was wearing his usual working gear of jeans, turtleneck and windbreaker, having no need on board ship for dressier outfits. More suits sat behind a long wooden table at the front of the room. Sitting in a chair to the right of the table was a man in a uniform. He was speaking in Danish, his words taken down by a stenographer.

Becker indicated a seat, sat next to Austin, and whispered in his ear. "That's the representative from the coast guard. You're next."

The coast guard witness concluded a few minutes later, and Austin heard his own name called. Four men and two women sat at the table, with the group evenly divided between Faroese and Danish representatives. The magistrate, an avuncular Dane with a long Viking face, said his name was Lundgren. He explained to Austin that he would ask questions, with the others on the board offering follow-up. This was only an inquiry to collect an informational base, not a trial, he explained, so there would be no cross-examination. He would also translate when necessary.

Austin eased into the chair, and under questioning, offered a straightforward account of the rescue. He didn't have to embellish the suffering or the crew's ordeal in its dark and practically airless tomb. The expression on Becker's face showed that he was pleased with what he heard. Austin stepped down after forty-five minutes, with the thanks of the board. He was anxious to leave, but decided to stay when the court's chairman announced, in Danish and Eng- lish, that the captain of the Sea Sentinel would present his case.

Austin was curious how anyone could defend himself against eye- witness accounts. The door opened and two policemen walked in. Between them was a tall and ruggedly built man in his mid-forties. Austin took in the ginger Captain Ahab chin-fringe, the coifed hair and the gilt-trimmed uniforrri.

The magistrate asked the witness to sit down and introduce him- self.

"My name is Marcus Ryan," the man said, his gray eyes making direct contact with those in the audience. "I am the executive direc- tor of the Sentinels of the Sea organization and captain of the SOS flagship, the Sea Sentinel. For those who don't know us, SOS is an in- ternational organization dedicated to the preservation of the sea and the marine life that dwells within it."

"Please give the court an account of the events surrounding your collision with the Danish cruiser Leif Eriksson/'

Ryan started into a diatribe against the whale hunt. Speaking in a firm voice, the magistrate asked him to keep his remarks confined to the collision. Ryan apologized and described how the Sea Sentinel had suddenly veered toward the cruiser, striking it.

"Captain Ryan," Lundgren said with unconcealed amusement. "Do you mean to tell me that your ship attached and rammed the Leif Eriksson of its own accord?"

For the first time since he'd started testifying, Ryan lost his aplomb. "Uh, no, sir. I'm telling you that the controls of my ship did not respond."

"Let me see if I understand this clearly," said a woman on the board of inquiry. "You are saying that the ship took control of itself and went off on its merry way."

There was a ripple of laughter in the audience. "It seems so," Ryan conceded.

His admission opened the doors for a round of probing questions. The hearing may not have been adversarial, Austin thought, but the court was nibbling Ryan apart like a flock of hungry ducks. Ryan did his best to parry the questions, but with each reply, his case became weaker. Finally he lifted his hands, as if to say enough.

"I realize that my explanation raises more questions than it an- swers. But let me say this unequivocally, so there is no misunder- standing. We did not deliberately ram the Danish ship. I have witnesses who can back me up. You can check with Captain Pe- tersen. He'll tell you that I warned him."

"How long before the collision did this warning occur?" Lundgren asked.

Ryan took a deep breath and let it out. "Less than a minute before we hit."

Lundgren asked no further questions. Ryan was excused, and the female reporter from CNN took the stand. She was calm during her recounting of the collision, but she broke down and glared at Ryan with accusing eyes when she described the death other cameraman.

Lundgren signaled a court officer to insert a videotape into a TV set that had been set off to one side where everyone had a good view of the screen. The tape began to roll. It showed Ryan standing on the deck of his ship surrounded by reporters and photographers. There was some joking about rough seas, then the reporter's voice saying:

"Just make sure the story is worth all the damned Dramamine I swallowed."

The camera executed a close-up of Ryan's grinning face as he replied: "I can almost guarantee that you'll see action." As the cam- era followed his finger pointing toward the Danish cruiser, there was a muttering in the audience. That's it, Austin thought. Ryan is toast.

The tape ended, and Lundgren asked the reporter one question. "Was that your voice on the tape?"

When the reporter replied in the affirmative, Ryan sprang to his feet.

"That's unfair. You're using my comment completely out of con- text !"

"Please be seated, Mr. Ryan," Lundgren said, a bemused expres- sion on his face.

Ryan realized his outburst would bolster the image of a hothead capable of ramming a ship. He regained his composure. "My apolo- gies, sir. I was not told that the video would be introduced into evi- dence. I hope I will have the chance to comment on it."

"This is not an American court of law, but you will have every op- portunity to make your side known before this hearing is adjourned. The board will hear from Captain Petersen and his crew as soon as they are able. You will remain in protective custody at the police sta- tion until then. We will do our best to expedite the process."

Ryan thanked the court. Then, escorted by the policemen, he left the room.

"Is that all?" Austin asked Becker.

"Apparently so. I expected they might ask you back to the stand, but it appears they don't need you anymore. I hope your plans haven't been disrupted."

Austin assured Becker that it was no problem. He sat in his chair as the room began to empty, chewing over Ryan's testimony. Either the man was telling the truth or he was a very good actor. That would be for wiser men to decide. First a good, stiff cup of coffee, then he would check out earlier flights to Copenhagen. From there, he'd fly back to Washington.

"Mr. Austin."

A woman was walking toward him, her face wreathed in a bright smile. Austin noticed her athletic and well-proportioned figure, the chestnut hair that fell to her shoulders, the unblemished skin and

alert eyes. She was dressed in a white Icelandic wool jumper known as a lopapesya.

They shook hands. "My name is Therri Weld," she said, in a voice

that was mellow and warm. "I'm a legal advisor with the SOS or- ganization."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Weld. What can I do for you?" Therri had been watching Austin's serious expression as he gave his testimony, and she was unprepared for his devastating smile. With his broad shoulders, burnished features and blue-green eyes, he reminded her of a buccaneer captain in a pirate movie. She almost

forgot what she was going to say, but quickly regained her mental footing.

"I wonder if you could spare a few minutes of your time," she said.

"I was about to look for a cup of coffee. You're welcome to join me.

"Thanks. There's a pretty decent cafe around the corner." They found a quiet table and ordered two cappuccinos.

"Your testimony was fascinating," she said, as they sipped their coffee.

"Your Captain Ryan was the star of the day. My words paled by comparison with his story."

Therri laughed softly. Her laughter had a musical lilt that Austin liked. "Today

wasn't his finest hour, I'm afraid. Usually he can be

quite eloquent, particularly on those subjects he's most passionate about."

"Tough trying to explain to a bunch of skeptics that your ship was possessed by evil spirits. The reporter's testimony and the video didn't help."

"I agree, which is why I wanted to meet with you."

Austin gave her his best country-boy grin. "Aw, shucks, I had hoped you found yourself hopelessly attracted by my animal mag- netism."

Therri raised a finely arched brow. "That goes without saying," she said. "But the main reason I wanted to talk was to see if you could help SOS."

"To begin with, Ms. Weld-"

"Therri. And may I call you Kurt?"

Austin nodded. "I've got a couple of problems right off the bat, Therri. First of all, I don't know how I can help you. And second, I don't know if I want to help your organization. I'm not in favor of whale slaughter, but I don't endorse radical nutcases."

Therri skewered Austin with a leveled gaze of her laser-bright eyes. "Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Edward Abbey were considered radical nut cases in their times. But I concede your point. SOS tends to be too activist for the taste of many. Okay, you say you don't endorse radicals. Do you endorse injustice, because that's exactly what's involved here."

"In what way?"

"Marcus did not ram that Danish ship on purpose. I was in the pilot- house when it happened. He and the others did everything they could to avoid that collision."

"Have you told this to the Danish authorities?"

"Yes. They said they didn't need me to testify and told me to leave the country."

"Okay," Austin said. "I believe you."

"Just like that? You don't seem like someone who accepts the world at face value."

"I don't know what else to say without offending you."

"Nothing you say can offend me."

"Glad to hear that. But what gives you the idea that I would care whether the case against Ryan is just or not?"

"I'm not asking you to care about Marcus." Therri's tone hinted that there was a bit of hard steel behind her soft features. Austin suppressed a smile. "What exactly do you want from me, Therri?"

She brushed a lock of hair out other face and said, "I'd like you to make a dive on the Sea Sentinel"

"What purpose would a dive serve?"

"It might prove that Marcus is innocent." "In what way?"

She spread her hands. "I don't know. But you might find some- thing', all I know is that Marcus is telling the truth. To be honest, much of his radicalism is hot air. He's really a hard-nosed pragma- list who calculates the odds very carefully. He's not the kind of per- son who goes around ramming navy ships in a fury. Besides, he loved the Sea Sentinel. He even picked the ridiculous psychedelic color scheme himself. No one on the ship, including me, intended for any- one to get hurt."

Austin leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head and stared at Therri's earnest face. He liked the way her perfect lips turned up in a Mona Lisa smile even when she was serious. Her girl- next-door appearance couldn't disguise the sensuous woman who lurked behind remarkable eyes. There were a thousand reasons why he should simply thank her for the coffee, shake her hand and wish her good luck. There were maybe three good reasons why he might consider her request. She was beautiful. She might have a case. And, right or wrong, she was passionate about her cause. His plane flight was two days away. There was no reason his short stay in the Faroes had to be boring.

Intrigued, he sat forward, and ordered another round of coffees.

"Okay, then," Austin said. "Tell me exactly what happened."

8

A FEW HOURS LATER, Austin was a world away from the

warmth of the coffee shop, encased in the bulbous protective armor of his aluminum Hardsuit, sinking once more into the cold Faroese sea. As he dropped into the deep, he smiled as he pictured how Becker would react if he knew that a Danish vessel was being used to help Marcus Ryan and the SOS. It would serve the conniv- ing little bureaucrat right, Austin thought, his chuckle echoing inside the helmet.

After taking leave of Them Weld, he had gone back to the hotel, called Captain Larsen and asked permission to make another dive from the Thor. He said he wanted to shoot pictures of the rescue scene for a report, which was partially true. Larsen didn't hesitate to say yes and even sent a shuttle boat in to bring Austin back to the ship.

Since Becker had asked Austin to leave the Hardsuit, it was all ready for him.

Austin's fathometer told him he was nearing bottom. He slowed his descent with short bursts of the vertical thrusters and came to a hummingbird hover about fifty feet above the bow section of the cruiser. The sea had wasted no time gathering the ship to its bosom. A shaggy coat of marine growth covered the hull and superstructure like an alpaca blanket. Schools ofdeepwater fish nosed in and out of the portholes, drawn by sea life that had made its home in the shad- owed nooks and crannies of the vessel.

Using a digital still camera, Austin shot pictures of the hole that the Sea Lamprey had made during the rescue mission and of the three-sided gash where the Sea Sentinel had punctured the hull. Austin had quizzed Captain Larsen about the last known position of the Sea Sentinel, relative to the cruiser. Using an undersea dead reck- oning, he headed in the general area of the sinking.

He used a standard search pattern, running a series of roughly parallel courses until his lights picked out the psychedelic paint job on the ship's hull. Like the cruiser, the SOS ship was already grow- ing a fur coat of marine growth. The

combination of sea grass and tie-dye effect was startling. The Sea Sentinel had landed right-side- up on the bottom, and except for its smashed pug nose, the ship ap- peared to be in sound condition.

Austin surveyed the crushed bow and recalled Ryan's testimony. The engines had gone haywire, Ryan said, and failed to respond to controls. There was no way to check out the engines without going inside the wreck, but the steering system might more easily be in- vestigated, because part of it was external. The steering of a modern ship is done with a combination of electronics and hydraulics. But even with computers, GPS positioning and autopilot, the concept is no different than it was when Columbus set sail to look for India. At one end is a wheel or a tiller. At the other is a rudder. Turn the wheel, and the rudder pivots, sending the vessel in the appropriate direction.

Austin soared above the stern, executed a hairpin turn, then dropped several yards until he was facing the man-tail rudder. Curious.

The rudder was intact, but something was out of sync. Bolted to the rudder were two cables that led forward from the blade to each side of the hull. Austin followed the starboard cable to a steel box about the size of a large suitcase that was welded to the hull. An elec- trical conduit led from the box through the hull.

Even more curious.

The welds around the boxes and conduit were shiny and looked new. He backed off and followed the cable to an identical box on the other side. He raised the camera and made a couple of shots. A rubber-coated line as thick as a man's thumb connected the two boxes. Another line ran from the port-side box along the curve of the hull to a point that would have been above the waterline when the ship was afloat. At its end was a flat plastic disk about six inches in diameter. The significance of what he was seeing dawned on Austin.

Loofs lie someone owes you an apology, Mr. Ryan. Austin took some pictures, then pried the disk off with his ma- nipulators and placed it in a carrying case attached to the outside of the Hardsuit. He stayed down another twenty minutes, exploring every square inch of the hull. Finding nothing more out of the ordi- nary, he tapped his vertical thruster control and began the trip to the surface. Once out of his Hardsuit, he thanked Captain Larsen for the use of the Thor and caught a boat ride into Torshavn.

Back in his hotel room, he slipped the cassette out of the digital camera and into his laptop computer and brought the underwater pictures onto the screen. He studied the enlarged and enhanced pic- tures until he practically had them committed to memory, then he called Therri and asked to meet her again at the coffee shop. He got there early and had the computer set up on the table when she arrived a few minutes later.

"Good news or bad?" she said.

"Both." Austin pushed the laptop across the table. "I've solved one mystery, but uncovered another."

She sat down and stared at the picture on the screen. "What ex- actly am I looking at?"

"I think it's a mechanism to override or bypass the steering con- trols from the bridge."

"You're sure of this?"

"Reasonably certain."

He clicked the computer mouse through a series of pictures that showed the boxes welded to the hull from different angles. "These housings could cover winches that can pull the rudder in either di- rection or lock it in place. Look here. This electrical connection runs up the side of the ship to a receiver above the waterline. Someone out- side the ship could have controlled the steering."

Therri furrowed her brow. "Looks like a little pie plate."

Austin dug into his jacket, pulled out the plastic disk he'd pried off the hull, and dropped it on the table. "No pie in this plate. It's an antenna that could have been used to pick up signals."

Therri glanced at the screen, then picked the disk up and studied it. "This would explain the steering problems Marcus had. What about the engines he couldn't shut down?"

"You've got me there," Austin said. "If you could get into the ship and tear the

engine room apart, maybe you'd find a mechanism that would allow the ship's speed to be controlled from the outside as well."

"I knew everyone on the Sea Sentinel. They're intensely loyal." She jutted her chin forward as if she expected an argument. "There's no one in that crew who would sabotage the ship."

"I haven't made any accusations."

"Sorry," she said. "I suppose I should keep an open mind about someone from the crew being involved."

"Not necessarily. Let me ask what they say at airport security. Did anyone else pack your baggage or has it been out of your sight?"

"So you do think someone from the outside could have sabotaged the ship."

Austin nodded. "I found a power source line for the winches lead- ing into the hull to tap the ship's energy supply. Someone would have to get inside the ship to accomplish that."

"Now that you mention it," she said without hesitation, "the ship needed some engine work. It was in dry dock for four days in the Shetland Islands."

"Who did the work?" "Marcus would know. I'll ask him."

"It could be important." He tapped the screen. "This may be Ryan's ticket out of jail. I'd suggest you get in touch with a guy at my hotel named Becker who seems to be some sort ofbehind-the-scenes mucky-muck with the Danish navy department. He might be able to help."

"I don't understand. Why would the Danes want to help Marcus after all the awful things they've said about him?"

"That's for public consumption. What they really want is to kick Ryan's butt out of the Faroes and make sure he never shows his face here again. They don't want him to get on his soapbox, because it might scare away companies that are thinking about investing in the Faroes. Sorry if this messes up Ryan's martyrdom plans."

"I won't deny that Marcus was hoping to make this a cause celebre."

"Isn't that a risky strategy? If he pushes the Danes too far, they may be forced to convict him and toss him into jail. He doesn't strike me as a reckless guy."

"He isn't reckless at all, but Marcus will take a calculated risk if he thinks the stakes are worth it. In this case, he would have weighed going to jail against a chance to stop the grind."

Austin extracted the camera cassette from the computer and pre- sented it to Therri. "Tell Becker that I will testify to what I saw and verify that I took these pictures. I'll run a check on the manufacturer of this antenna, but it's possible that it was put together out of stan- dard parts and won't tell us anything."

"I don't know how to thank you," Therri said, rising from her chair.

"My standard fee is acceptance of a dinner invitation."

"I'd be more than pleased to-" She stopped short and glanced across the room past Austin's shoulder. "Kurt, do you know that man? He's been staring at you for some time."

Austin turned, and saw a balding, long-jawed man in his sixties, who was now making his way to the table.

"It's Kurt Austin ofNUMA, if I'm not mistaken," the man said in a booming voice.

Austin stood and extended his hand. "Professor Jorgensen, nice to see you. It's been three years since we last saw each other."

"Four, actually, since we worked on that project in the Yucatan. What a wonderful surprise! I saw the news of the miraculous rescue you performed, but assumed you had departed the Faroes."

The professor was tall and narrow-shouldered. The ample tufts of hair flanking his freckled pate resembled swan wings. He spoke English with an Oxford accent, which was not surprising, since he had spent his undergraduate years at the famed English university.

"I stayed on to help Ms. Weld here with a project." Austin intro- duced Therri, and said, "This is Professor Peter Jorgensen. Dr. Jor- gensen is one of the foremost fisheries physiologists in the world." "Kurt makes it sound far more glamorous than it is. I'm simply a fish physician, so to speak. Well, what brings you to this far-flung out- post of civilization, Ms. Weld?"

"I'm an attorney. I'm studying the Danish legal system."

Austin said, "How about you, Professor? Are you doing some work here in the Faroes?"

"Yes, I've been looking into some peculiar phenomena," he said, without taking his eyes off of Therri. "Maybe I'm being forward, but I have a splendid suggestion. Perhaps we could have dinner together tonight and I could tell you about what I've been doing." "I'm afraid Ms. Weld and I already have plans." A pained expression crossed Them's face. "Oh, Kurt, I'm so sorry. I started to say I'd be pleased to have dinner with you, but not tonight. I'm going to be busy with that legal matter we discussed."

"Hoist by my own petard," Austin said with a shrug. "Looks like you and I have a date, Professor."

"Splendid! I'll see you in the dining room of the Hotel Hania around seven, if that sounds all right." Turning to Therri, he said,

"I'm devastated, Ms. Weld. I hope we will meet again." He kissed her hand.

"He's charming," Therri said, after Jorgensen left. "Very courtly in an old-fashioned way."

"I agree," Austin said, "but I'd still rather have you as my dinner partner."

"I'm so sorry. Perhaps when we get back to the States." Her eyes darkened a shade. "I've been thinking about your theory about the possibility that the Sea Sentinel was controlled from the outside. What would be the range involved in controlling a ship?"

"It could be done from quite a distance, but whoever did it would stay close by to see if the ship were responding to command. Any ideas?"

"There were a number of boats carrying press in the area. Even a helicopter."

"The controls could have been worked from the sea or the air. It wouldn't have required much in the way of equipment. A transmit- ter with a joystick, maybe, like you see for video games. Assuming we know the how, let's talk about the why. Who would benefit by neutralizing Ryan?"

"Do you have all day? The list could go on forever. Marcus has made enemies all over the world."

"For a start, let's confine ourselves to the Faroe Islands." "The whalers would top the enemy list. Passions run high over the issue, but they're basically decent people, in spite of their odd customs. I can't see them attacking the navy ship that's been sent to protect them." She paused in thought. "There's another possibility, but it's probably too farfetched to consider."

Try me.

She furrowed her brow in concentration. "After thegrindarap op- eration, Marcus and his crew planned to make a showing at a fish farm owned by the Oceanus Corporation. The Sentinels are also against large-scale aquaculture, because of the harm to the environ- ment."

"What do you know about Oceanus?"

"Not much. It's a multinational distributor of seafood products. Traditionally, they've bought fish from fleets around the world, but in the last few years they've gotten into aquaculture in a huge way. Their fish farms are on the same scale as some of the land farms op- erated by the agribusiness outfits in the States."

"You think Oceanus could have arranged this whole thing?"

"Oh, I don't know, Kurt. They would have the resources, though. And, just maybe, the motive."

"Where was their fish farm located?"

"Not far from here, near a place called Skaalshavn. Marcus planned to run the Sea Sentinel back and forth in front of the farm for the benefit of the cameras." Therri glanced at her watch. "That reminds me... I should be going. I've got a lot

of work to do."

They shook hands, vowing to get together again. Therri made her way across the dining room and stopped briefly to throw him a coquettish glance over her shoulder. The gesture was probably meant to be reassuring, but it only made Austin sadder.

9

PROFESSOR JORGENSEN HAD politely watched for sev- eral minutes as Austin tried to navigate his way through the in- comprehensible courses listed on the menu, but finally he could bear it no longer. He leaned across the table and said, "If you'd like to try a Faroese specialty, I'd recommend the fried puffin or the pilot-whale steak."

Austin pictured himself gnawing on a drumstick from one of the stubby little birds with the parrot beak and passed on the puffin. After hearing the bloody way in which pilot whales met their demise in the Faroes, he decided he would rather eat shark snout, but he set- tled for thes/yrpily'ot, well-aged mutton. After one bite, he wished he had gone for the puffin.

"How's your mutton?" Jorgensen said.

"Not quite as tough as shoe leather," Austin replied, working his jaw.

"Oh my, I should have advised you to get the boiled mutton, as I did. They dry slerpifyot in the wind. It's usually prepared at Christ- mas and served the rest of the year. It's a bit over the hill, as they say." He brightened at a new thought. "The life expectancy in the Faroes is quite high, so it must be good for you."

Austin sawed off a small bite and managed to swallow it. Then he put his knife and fork down while he gave his jaw muscles a rest. "What brings you to the Faroes, Dr. Jorgensen? It can't be the food."

The professor's eyes danced with amusement. "I've been looking into reports of diminishing fish stocks in the islands. It's a real mys- tery!

"In what way?"

"I thought at first that the cause of the vanishing fish might be pol- lution, but the waters are amazingly pure around the Faroes. I can only do so much testing on-site, so I'm heading back to Copenhagen tomorrow to run some water samples through the computer. There may be small traces of chemicals that might have a bearing on the problem."

"Any theories as to the source of the chemicals?" "It's strange," he said, tugging at one of his tufts of hair. "I'm sure

the problem has something to do with a nearby fish farm, but so far there is no discernible link between the two."

Austin had been eyeing the mutton, wondering where he could get a burger, but his ears perked up at the professor's words. "Did you say you were testing the water near a fish farm?"

"Yes. There are several aquaculture facilities in the islands that produce trout, salmon and the like. I collected samples from the wa- ters around a farming operation in Skaalshavn, a few hours' drive up the coast from Torshavn on Sundini, the long sound that separates Streymoy from the island ofEysturoy. Used to be a whaling station there in the old days. The farm is owned by a big fisheries conglom- erate."

Austin took a long shot. "Oceanus?"

"Yes, you've heard of it?" "Only recently. As I understand what you're saying, Professor, the fish levels near this farm are lower than they should be."

"That's right," Jorgensen replied with furrowed brow. "A real puzzle."

"I've heard fish farms can be harmful to the environment," Austin said, recalling his conversation with Therri Weld.

"True. The waste products from a fish farm can be toxic. They feed the fish a special chemical diet so they'll grow faster, but Oceanus claims it has a state-of-the-art water purification system. So far I haven't found any evidence to dispute that claim."

"Have you visited this fish farm?"

Jorgensen bared his big teeth in a grin. "No visitors allowed. They've got the placed locked up tighter than the crown jewels. I managed to speak off-premises with someone from the law firm that represents the company in Denmark. He assured me that no chem- icals were used at the farm and that it has the finest in water-cleaning facilities. Always the skeptical scientist, I rented a little house not far from the Oceanus operation and went as close as I could by boat to take the water samples. As I said, I'm leaving for Copenhagen to- morrow, but you and your young lady friend are welcome to go up to the cottage. It's a pretty ride."

"Thanks, Professor. Unfortunately, Ms. Weld will be busy the next few days."

"That is unfortunate." Austin nodded absentmindedly. He was intrigued by Jorgensen's mention of the tight security at Oceanus. Where some might see this as an obstacle, Austin saw an invitation to probe the connection be- tween Oceanus and the disastrous collision of the SOS ship and the cruiser. "I might take you up on your cottage offer. I'd like to see a little more of the Faroes before I leave."

"Wonderful! Stay as long as you want. The islands are spectacu- lar. I'll call the landlord to say you'll be coming. His name is Gunnar Jepsen, and he lives in a house behind the cottage. You can use my rental car. There's a small boat that goes along with the cottage and plenty to keep you busy. Incredible birding on the cliffs, the hiking is superb, and there are some fascinating archeological ruins nearby." Austin smiled and said, "I'm sure I'll find something to do."

After dinner, they had a nightcap in the hotel bar, then bid each other good-bye with a promise to hook up in Copenhagen. The pro- fessor was staying with a friend that night and would leave the is- lands in the morning. Austin went up to his hotel room. He wanted to get an early start the next day. He went over to the window and stood awhile in thought as he looked out over the quaint town and harbor, then he snatched up his cell phone and punched out a familiar number.

Gamay Morgan-Trout was in her office at NUMA headquarters in Washington, D.C., staring intently at the computer monitor, when the telephone rang. Without moving her eyes from the screen, she picked up the telephone and mumbled an absentminded hello. At the sound of Austin's voice, she broke into a dazzling smile that was made distinctive by the slight space between her front teeth.

"Kurt!" she said with obvious delight. "It's wonderful to hear from you."

"Same here. How are things back at NUMA?"

Still smiling, Gamay brushed a strand of long, dark-red hair away from her forehead and said, "We've been treading water here since you and Joe left. I'm reading a new abstract on toadfish nerve re- search that could help cure balance problems in humans. Paul's at his computer working on a model of the Java Trench. I don't know when I've had so much excitement. I feel sorry for you and Joe. That daring rescue must have bored you to tears."

Paul Trout's computer was back-to-back with his wife's. Trout was staring at the screen in typical pose, with head dipped low, par- tially in thought, but also to accommodate his six-foot-eight height. He had light-brown hair parted down the middle in Jazz Age style and combed back at the temples. As always, he was dressed impec- cably, wearing a lightweight olive tan suit from Italy, and one of the colorful matching bow ties that were his addiction. He peered up- ward with hazel eyes, as if over glasses, although he wore contacts.

"Please ask our fearless leader when he's coming home," Paul said. "NUMA headquarters has been as quiet as a tomb while he and Joe have been making headlines."

Austin overheard Trout's question. "Tell Paul I'll be back at my desk in a few days. Joe's due later in the week, after he wraps up tests on his latest toy. I wanted to let you know where I'd be. I'm driving up the Faroe coast tomorrow to a little village called Skaalshavn."

"What's going on?" Gamay said.

"I want to look into a fish-farm operation run by a company called Oceanus. There may be a connection between Oceanus and the sink- ing of those two ships here in the Faroes. While I'm poking around, could you see what you can learn about this outfit? I don't have much to go on. Maybe Hiram can help out." Hiram Yeager was the com- puter whiz who rode herd on NUMA's vast database.

They chatted a few more minutes, with Austin filling Gamay in on the rescue of the Danish sailors, then hung up, with Gamay prom- ising to get right on the

Oceanus request. She related the gist of her conversation with Austin.

"Kurt can whistle up a wind better than anyone I know," Paul said with a chuckle, alluding to the ancient belief that whistling on a ship can attract a storm. "What did he want to know about fish-farming, how to run your tractor underwater?"

"No, a grain binder," Gamay said with exaggerated primness. "How could I forget that you practically grew up on a fishing boat?"

"Just a simple son of a son of a fisherman, as Jimmy Buffett would say." Trout had been born on Cape Cod, into a fishing family. His an- cestral path had diverged when, as a youngster, he hung around the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Some of the scientists at the Institution had encouraged him to study oceanography. He'd re- ceived his Ph.D. in ocean science at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, specializing in deep-ocean geology, and was profi- cient in using computer graphics in his various undersea projects.

"I happen to know that despite your display of ignorance, you know a lot more about aquaculture than you let on."

"Fish-farming is nothing new. Back home, folks have been seeding and harvesting the clam and oyster flats for a hundred years or more."

"Then you know it's essentially the same principle, only extended to fin fish. The fish are bred in tanks and raised in open net cages that float in the ocean. The farms can produce fish in a fraction of the time it takes to catch them in the wild."

Paul frowned. "With the government clamping down on the wild fishery because of stock depletion, competition like that is the last thing a fisherman needs."

"The fish farmers would disagree. They say aquaculture produces cheaper food, provides employment and pours money into the econ- omy."

"As a marine biologist, where do you stand on the issue?" Gamay had received a degree in marine archaeology before chang- ing her field of interest and enrolling at Scripps, where she'd attained a doctorate in marine biology, and in the process met and married Paul.

"I guess I stand smack in the middle," she said. "Fish-farming does have benefits, but I'm a little worried that with big companies running the farms, things could get out of control."

"Which way is the wind blowing?"

"Hard to tell, but I can give you an example of what's happening. Imagine you're a politician running for office and the fish-farm in- dustry says it will invest hundreds of millions of dollars in the coastal communities, and that investment will generate jobs and billions of dollars each year in economic activity in your district. Which side would you back ?"

Trout let out a low whistle. "Billions? I had no idea there was that kind of money involved."

"I'm talking about a fraction of the world business. There are fish farms all over the world. If you've had salmon or shrimp or scallops lately, the fish you ate could have been raised in Canada or Thailand or Colombia."

"The farms must have incredible capacity to pump out fish in those quantities."

"It's phenomenal. In British Columbia, they've got seventy million farm-raised salmon compared to fifty-five thousand wild caught."

"How can the wild fishermen compete with production like that?"

"They cant" Gamay said, with a shrug. "Kurt was interested in a company called Oceanus. Let's see what I can find."

Her hands played over the computer keyboard. "Strange. Usually the biggest problem with the Internet is too much information. There's almost nothing on Oceanus. All I could find is this one- paragraph article saying that a salmon-processing plant in Canada had been sold to Oceanus. I'll peck around some more."

It took another fifteen minutes of hunting, and Paul was deep in the Java Trench again, when he heard Gamay finally say, "Aha!" "Pay dirt?"

Gamay scrolled down. "I found a few sentences about the acqui- sition buried in an industry newsletter story. Oceanus apparently owns companies around the

world that are expected to produce more than five hundred million pounds a year. The merger gives market access in this country through an American subsidiary. The seller figures the U.S. will buy a quarter of what they produce."

"Five hundred million pounds! I'm turning in my fishing rod. I wouldn't mind seeing one of these plants. Where's the nearest one?" "The Canadian operation I just mentioned. I'd like to see it, too." "So what's stopping us? We're twiddling our thumbs while Kurt and Joe are away. The world isn't in need of saving, and if it is, Dirk and Al are always available."

She squinted at the screen. "The plant is in Cape Breton, which is more than a skip and a jump from the shores of the Potomac."

"When will you learn to trust my Yankee ingenuity?" Paul said with a fake sigh.

While Gamay watched with a bemused smile, Paul picked up the phone and punched out a number. After a brief conversation, he hung up with a triumphant grin on his boyish face. "That was a pal in NUMA's travel department. There's a NUMA plane leaving for Boston in a few hours. They have two seats available. Maybe you can charm the pilot into an add-on to Cape Breton."

"It's worth a try," Gamay said, pushing the OFF button on her computer.

"What about your toadfish research?" Paul said.

Gamay replied with a bad imitation of a toad's croak. "What about the Java Trench?"

"It's been there for millions of years. I think it can wait a few more days."

His computer monitor went blank as well. Relieved that their boredom, at last, had come to an end, they raced each other to their office door.

10

THE MORNING GLOOM had burned off, and the Faroes were enjoying a rare moment of sunshine that revealed the splendor of the island scenery. The countryside seemed to be covered in bright-green billiard table baize. The rugged terrain was barren of trees, dotted by grass-roofed houses and an occasional church steeple, and laced by crooked stone walls and foot trails.

Austin drove the professor's Volvo along a twisting coastal road that offered inland views of distant mountains. Jagged gray out- croppings rose from the cold blue sea like huge, petrified whale fins. Birds swirled around the lofty vertical cliffs where the sea had sculpted the irregular shoreline.

Around midday, Austin emerged from a mountain tunnel and saw a doll-like village clustered on a gently sloping hill at the edge of a fjord. The serpentine road followed a series of descending switchbacks, dropping thousands of feet in a few miles. The Volvo's wheels skirted the edge of hairpin turns with no guardrails along the berm. Austin was happy when he reached the level road that ran be- tween the foam-flecked surf and the colorfully painted houses built on the slope of the hillside like spectators at an amphitheater.

A woman was planting flowers in front of a tiny church, whose grassy roof was surmounted by a short, rectangular steeple. Austin danced at his Faroese phrasebook and got out of the car.

He said: "Orsaa. Hvar er Gunnar Jepsen?" Excuse me, where could

I find Gunnar Jepsen?

She put her trowel down and came over. Austin saw that she was a handsome woman who could have been between fifty and sixty. Her silvery hair was tied in a bun, and she was tanned except for the sun blush on her high cheekbones. Her eyes were as gray as the nearby sea. A bright smile crossed her narrow face, and she pointed toward a side road that led to the outskirts of town.

"Gott taaf" he said. Thank you.

"EingisJt?"

"No, I'm American."

"We don't see many Americans here in Skaalshavn," she said, speaking English with a Scandinavian lilt. "Welcome."

"I hope I'm not the last."

"Gunnar lives up there on the hill. Just follow that little road." She smiled again.

"I hope you have a good visit."

Austin thanked her once more, got back in the car and followed a pair of gravel ruts for about a quarter of a mile. The road ended at a large grass-roofed house built of vertical, dark chocolate-colored planking. A pickup truck was parked in the drive. A hundred yards down the slope was a smaller twin of the main house. Austin climbed the porch stairs and knocked.

The man who answered the door was of medium height and slightly on the portly side. He had an apple-round face and cheeks, and thin strands of reddish-blond hair combed over his bald head. "Ja," he said with a pleasant smile.

"Mr. Jepsen?" Austin said. "My name is Kurt Austin. I'm a friend of Professor Jorgensen's."

"Mr. Austin. Come in." He pumped Kurt's hand like a used-car salesman greeting a prospect. Then he ushered him into a rustic liv- ing room. "Dr. Jorgensen phoned and said you were coming. It's a long drive from Torshavn," Jepsen said. "Would you like a drink?" "Not now, thanks. Maybe later."

Jepsen nodded and said, "You're here to do a little fishing?" "I've heard you can catch fish on dry land in the Faroes." "Not quite," Jepsen said with a grin, "but almost as good."

"I was doing some ship salvage work in Torshavn and thought fishing would be a good way to relax."

"Ship salvage? Austin." He swore in Faroese. "I should have known. You're the American who saved the Danish sailors. I saw it on the television. Miraculous! Wait 'til the people in the village learn I am entertaining a celebrity."

"I was hoping I wouldn't be bothered."

"Of course, but it will be impossible to keep your visit a secret from the townspeople."

"I met one of them outside the church. She seemed nice enough."

"That would be the minister's widow. She's the postmistress and head gossip. Everyone will know you're here by now."

"Is that the professor's cottage down the hill?"

"Yes," Jepsen said, removing a key ring from a nail in the wall. "Come, I'll show you." Austin got his duffel from the car. As they walked down the hard-packed path, Jepsen said, "You're a good friend of Dr. Jorgensen?"

"I met him a few years ago. His reputation as a fish scientist is world-known."

"Yes, I know. I was very honored to have him here. Now you."

They stopped in front of the cottage, whose porch offered a view of the harbor, where a picturesque fleet of fishing boats was anchored.

"Are you a fisherman, Mr. Jepsen?"

"In a little place like this, you survive by doing many things. I rent out my cottage. My expenses aren't great."

They climbed onto the cottage porch and went inside. The inte- rior was basically one room with a single bed, bathroom, kitchen area, a small table and a couple of chairs, but it looked comfortable.

Jepsen said, "There's fishing gear in the closet. Let me know if you need a guide for fishing or hiking. My roots go back to the Vikings, and no one knows this place better."

"Thanks for your offer, but I've been around a lot of people lately. I'd like to spend some time on my own. I understand that a boat goes with the cottage."

"Third one from the end of the pier," Jepsen said. "A double- ender. The keys are in it."

"Thank you for your help. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to unpack, then I'll go into the village and stretch my legs," Austin said.

Jepsen told Austin to let him know if he needed anything. "Dress warm," he said as he went out the door. "The weather changes quickly around here."

Heeding Jepsen's advice, Austin pulled a windbreaker over his sweater. He went

outside and stood on the cottage porch, sucking in the cool air. The land sloped gradually down to the sea. From his van- tage, he had a clear view of the harbor, the fish pier and the boats. He walked back up the path to the Volvo and drove into the village.

Austin's first stop was the bustling fish pier, where a procession of trawlers unloaded their catches under an umbrella of squalling seabirds. He found the boat tied up as Jepsen had described. It was a well-built wooden inboard about twenty feet long, turned up dory- fashion at both ends. He checked the motor and found it relatively clean and new. The key was in the ignition, as Jepsen had said. Austin started the engine and listened to it for a few minutes. Satisfied that it was running smoothly, he switched it off and headed back to his car. On the way, he encountered the minister's widow coming out of a loading bay.

"Hallo, American," she said with a friendly grin. "Did you find Gunnar?"

"Yes, thank you."

She was holding a fish wrapped in newspaper. "I came down here to get some supper. My name is Pia Knutsen."

They shook hands. Pia's grip was warm and firm. "Nice to meet you. I'm Kurt Austin. I've been enjoying the sights.

Skaalshavn is a beautiful village. I've been wondering what the name means in English."

"You are talking to the unofficial village historian. Skaalshavn means 'Skull Harbor.' "

Austin glanced out at the water. "Is the bay shaped like a skull?" "Oh no. It goes way back. The Vikings discovered skulls in some caves when they founded the settlement." "People were here before the Vikings?"

"Irish monks, perhaps, or maybe even earlier. The caves were on the other side of the headland at what was the original harbor for the old whaling station. It became too small as fishing grew, so the fish- ermen moved their boats and settled here."

"I'd like to do some hiking. Would you recommend any routes where I can get a

good view of the town and its surroundings?" "From the bird cliffs, you can see for miles. Take that path behind the village," she said, pointing. "You will go through the moors by some beautiful waterfalls and streams, past a big lake. The trail climbs sharply after you pass the old farm ruins, and you will be at the cliffs. Don't go too close to the edge, especially if it's foggy, un- less you have wings. The ledges are nearly five hundred meters tall. Follow the cairns back and keep them on your left. The trail is steep and goes down fast. Don't walk too close to the edge along the sea, because sometimes the waves crash over the rocks and can catch you.

"I'll be careful." "One more thing. Dress warm. The weather changes quickly sometimes."

"Gunnar gave me the same advice. He seems quite knowledge- able. Is he a native?"

"Gunnar would like people to think he goes back to Erik the Red," she sniffed. "He's from Copenhagen. Moved into the village a year or two ago."

"Do you know him well?"

"Oh, yes," she said, with a roll of her lovely eyes. "Gunnar tried to get me into his bed, but I'm not that hard up."

Pia was a good-looking woman, and Austin wasn't surprised at Jepsen's attempt; but he hadn't driven all this way to tune in on the local romances. "I heard there was a fish operation of some sort up the coast."

"Yes, you'll see it from the cliffs. Ugly concrete and metal build- ings. The harbor is full of their fish cages. They raise fish there and ship it out. The local fishermen don't like it. The fishing around the old harbor has gone bad. No one from town works there. Not even

Gunnar anymore."

"He worked at the fish farm?"

"In the beginning. Something to do with construction. He used his money to buy his houses and lives off the rentals."

"Do you get many visitors here?" Austin was watching a sleek blue yacht coming into the harbor.

"Bird-watchers and fishermen." She followed Austin's eyes. "Like those men in that pretty boat. It's owned by a rich Spaniard, I hear. They say he came all the way from Spain for the fishing." Austin turned back to Pia. "You speak English very well." "We learn it in the schools along with Danish. And my husband and I spent some time in England when we were first married. I don't get much chance to speak it." She lifted the fish under Austin's nose and said, "Would you like to come to my house for dinner? I could practice my English."

"It wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"No, no. Come by after your walk. My house is behind the church."

They agreed to meet in a few hours, and Austin drove to the trail- head. The gravel path climbed gradually through rolling moors splashed with wildflowers, and passed near a small lake, almost per- fectly round, that looked as if it were made of cold crystal. About a mile from the lake, he came upon the ruins of an old farm and an an- cient graveyard.

The path grew steeper and less visible. As Pia advised, he followed the carefully piled heaps of rock that marked the way. He could see flocks of sheep so far away that they looked like bits of lint. Tower- ing in the distance were layered mountains with cascading wedding- veil waterfalls.

The trail led to the cliffs, where hundreds ofseabirds filled the air, balancing

delicately on updrafts of air. Tall sea stacks soared from the bay, their flat summits wreathed in fog. Austin chewed on a Power- Bar and thought that the Faroes must be the most otherworldly place on the planet.

He kept on going until he stood atop a ridge that gave him a panoramic view of the serrated coast. A rounded headland separated Skaalshavn from a smaller inlet. Clustered along the shore of the old harbor were dozens of neatly arranged buildings. As he surveyed the scene below, he felt a drop of rain on his cheek. Dark billowing clouds were rolling in from the layered mountains to obliterate the sun. He started down from the exposed ridge. Even with switch- backs easing the vertical drop, the going was hard on the steep trail, and he had to move slowly until the ground leveled out again. As he approached sea level, the heavens opened up. He kept heading to- ward the lights of the town, and before long he was at his car.

Pia took one look at the drenched and bedraggled figure at her door and shook her head.

"You look like you've crawled out of the sea." She pulled Austin in by the sleeve and ordered him to go into the bathroom and strip. Austin was too wet to protest. While he was undressing, she cracked the door open and tossed in a towel and dry clothes.

"I was sure my husband's clothes would fit," she said approvingly, when Austin ventured out in the shirt and pants. "He was a big man like you."

While Pia set the table, Austin spread his clothes out next to a wood stove, then stood practically on top of it, basking in the heat, until she informed him that dinner was ready.

The baked fresh cod melted in his mouth. They washed dinner down with a light homemade white wine. Dessert was a sweet raisin pudding. Over their meal, she talked about her life in the Faroes, and Austin told her a little about his NUMA work. She was fascinated by his travels to exotic places for his NUMA assignments.

"I forgot to ask, did you have a good walk, even with the rain?" Pia said as she cleared the dishes.

"I climbed to the top of the cliffs. The views were incredible. I saw the fish farm

you mentioned. Do they allow visitors?"

"Oh no/9 Pia replied, with a shake other head. "They don't let anyone in. Like I said before, none of the village men work there. There's a road along the shore that they used when they were build- ing, but it's blocked off with a high fence. Everything comes and goes by sea. They say it's like a separate town out there."

"Sounds interesting. Too bad no one can get in."

Pia refilled Austin's glass and gave him a sly look. "I could get in in a minute if I wanted to, through the Mermaid's Gate."

He shook his head, unsure he had heard her correctly. "The Mer- maid's Gate?"

"That's what my father used to call the natural arch at the edge of the old harbor. He used to take me out sometimes in his boat, and we'd go there. He never took me in. It's dangerous because of the cur- rents and rocks. Some men have drowned trying to go through the gate, so the fishermen stay away. They say it's haunted by the souls of the dead. You can hear them moaning, but it's only the way the wind blows through the caves."

"It sounds as if your father wasn't afraid of ghosts." "He wasn't afraid of any thing."

"What do these caves have to do with the fish farm?" "It's a way to go in. One cave joins others that lead to the old har- bor. My father said there are paintings on the walls. Wait, I'll show you.

She went to a bookcase and took out an old family album. Tucked between pages of photos was a sheet of paper, which she unfolded and spread on the table. Drawn on the paper were rough sketches of bison and deer. More interesting to Austin were depictions of long graceful boats powered by sail and oar.

"These are very old drawings," Austin said, although he was un- able to place them in time. "Did your father show them to anyone else?"

"Not outside the family. He wanted the caves kept a secret be- cause he was afraid they would get ruined if people knew about them."

"Then the caves can't be entered from the land side?"

"There was a way, but it was blocked with boulders. My father said it would be no problem to move them. He wanted to get some sci- entists in from the university so it would be done right, but he died in a storm."

I'm sorry.

Pia smiled. "Like I said, he wasn't afraid of anything. Anyhow, after he died, my mother moved the family away to live with rela- tives. I came back here with my husband. I was too busy raising kids to worry about the caves. Then the fish company bought the land and the old whaling station, and no one could get out there."

"Are there more pictures?"

She shook her head. "Poppa tried to make a map of the caves, but I don't know what happened to it. He said the people who made the paintings were smart. They used pictures offish and birds like signs. As long as you follow the right fish, you won't get lost. Some of the caves lead to blind alleys."

They talked into the night. Austin finally looked at his watch and said that he had to go. Pia wouldn't let him leave until he agreed to return for dinner the next evening. He drove along the deserted road in the dusky light that passes for night in northern climes.

A light was on at the main house, but he saw no sign ofJepsen, and guessed he had gone to bed. The rain had ended. He went out on the porch and stood there awhile, looking down on the quiet village and harbor, then went back inside the cottage and got ready to sack out. Although the remote village seemed peaceful, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that Skaalshavn was a place of dark secrets. Before he turned in, he made sure that the door and windows were locked.

11

PAUL TROUT THREADED the wide-beamed Humvee through the heavy Washington traffic like a runner going for a touchdown at the Super Bowl. Although he and Gamay often took the Hummer on four-wheeling family trips in the Virginia country- side, nothing they encountered off-road could compare with the chal- lenges of driving in the nation's capital. They made good time,

though, as Gamay called out openings in the traffic and Paul spun the wheel over without looking. Their ability to work together like a well-oiled machine had been crucial on countless NUMA assign- ments and was a tribute to the acumen of Admiral Sandecker, who had hired them together.

Paul turned down a narrow Georgetown street and tucked the Humvee into the parking space behind their brick town house, and they bolted for the door. Minutes later, they were jumping into a taxi, their hastily packed overnight bags in hand. The NUMA exec- utive jet was waiting at the airport with its engines warming up. The pilot, who was flying a contingent of scientists to Boston, knew the Trouts from past missions with the Special Assignments Team. She had gotten the okay from NUMA to add the extra leg to her trip and filed a new flight plan.

After dropping off the scientists at Logan Airport, the plane con- tinued up the Atlantic coast. With a cruising speed of nearly five hundred miles an hour, the Cessna Citation had the Trouts in Hali- fax, Nova Scoria, in time for a late dinner. They stayed overnight at a hotel near the airport and caught an Air Canada flight to Cape Breton early the next morning, then rented a car at the Sydney air- port and drove out of the city up the rocky coast to look for the pro- cessing plant that Oceanus had acquired. Gamay had picked up a travel guide at the airport. The travel writer who'd written the sec- tion describing this part of the remote coast must have been desper- ate, because he had listed the fish-processing plant as a tourist attraction.

After not seeing any signs of civilization for many miles, they came upon a combination general store, coffee shop and service station. Gamay, who was taking her turn at the wheel, pulled alongside the battered pickup trucks lined up in front of the ramshackle false-front building.

Paul looked up from the map he was studying. "Charming, but we've got another few miles before we get to the center of town."

"We have to stop for gas anyhow," Gamay said, tapping the fuel gauge. "While you pump the pump, I'll pump the locals for gossip."

Tucking the guidebook under her arm, Gamay stepped over the mangy black Labrador retriever stretched out in a deathlike sleep on the rickety front porch and pushed the door open. Her nostrils were greeted by a pleasant fragrance of

pipe tobacco, bacon and coffee. The store, which occupied one half of the room, was crammed with every sort of item, from beef jerky to rifle ammunition. The coffee shop took up the other side of the store.

A dozen or so men and women sat at round Formica-and-chrome tables. All eyes turned to Gamay. At five-ten and a hundred-thirty- five pounds, Gamay's slim-hipped figure and unusual red hair would have attracted attention at a Malibu beach party. The curious stares followed her every move as she poured two plastic cups full of cof- fee from a self-service dispenser.

Gamay went to pay, and the plump young woman at the cash reg- ister greeted her with a friendly smile. "Passing through?" she said, as if she couldn't imagine any traveler staying in town longer than it took to fill a coffee cup.

Gamay nodded. "My husband and I are taking a drive along the coast."

"Don't blame you for not staying," the woman said with resigna- tion. "Not much to see around here."

Despite her striking sophistication, Gamay's midwestern roots had given her a down-home earthiness that was hard to resist. "We think it's beautiful country," she said, with an engaging smile. "We'd stay longer if we had time." She opened the guidebook to the folded-over page. "It says here that there's a pretty little fishing harbor and a fish- processing plant nearby."

"It does?" the cashier said with disbelief.

The other people in the room had been listening to every word. A spindly white-haired woman cackled like a hen. "Fishing ain't what it used to be. Plant sold out. Some big outfit bought the business. Fired all the folks working there. Nobody knows what they're doing. People who work there never come into town. Sometimes we see the Eskimos driving around in their big black trucks."

Gamay glanced into the guidebook, looking for something she missed. "Did you say Eskimos•? I didn't think we were that far north."

Her innocent question started a table debate. Some of the locals contended that Eskimos guarded the plant. Others said that the men driving the SUVs were Indians or maybe Mongolians. Gamay won- dered if she had stumbled into the local insane asylum, a thought that was reinforced when the cashier mumbled

something about "aliens." "Aliens?" Gamay said.

The cashier blinked through thick, round-framed glasses, her eyes growing wider. "It's like that secret UFO place in the States, Area Fifty-one, like they show on The X-Files."

"I seen a UFO once when I was hunting near the old plant," in- terjected a man who could have been a hundred years old. "Big sil- ver thing all lit up."

"Hell, Joe," said the skinny woman, "I've seen you so lit up you've probably seen purple elephants."

"Yup," the man said with a gap-toothed grin. "Seen them, too." The restaurant filled with laughter.

Gamay smiled sweetly and said to the cashier, "We'd love to tell our friends back home that we saw a UFO base. Is it far from here?"

"Maybe twenty miles," the cashier said. She gave Gamay directions to the plant. Gamay thanked the young woman, put a ten-dollar bill in the empty tip jar, scooped up the coffees and headed out the door.

Paul was leaning against the car, his arms folded across his chest. He took the coffee she offered him. "Any luck?"

Gamay glanced back at the store. "I'm not sure. I seem to have run into the cast of Twin Pea/y. In the last few minutes, I've learned that this part of the world is home to Eskimos who drive big black SUVs, a UFO base and purple elephants."

"That explains it," he said with mock seriousness. "While you

were inside, a bunch of big critters the color of plums came thun- dering by here."

"After what I heard, I'm not surprised," she said, slipping behind the wheel.

"Think the locals were having a little fun at the expense of a tourist?" Paul said, getting into the passenger side.

"I'll let you know after we find big silver things around Area Fifty-one." Seeing

the quizzical expression on her husband's face, she laughed and said, "I'll explain on the way."

They drove past the turnoff that led to the town center and har- bor, into an area of heavy pine forest. Even with the cashier's de- tailed directions, which included every stump and stone for miles, they almost missed the turnoff. There was no sign marking the en- trance. Only the hard-packed ruts showing fairly recent use distin- guished the way from any of the other fire roads that cut into the thick woods.

About a half mile from the main road, they pulled over. The cashier had advised Gamay to park at a clearing near a big glacial boulder and to walk through the woods. A few townspeople who had driven close to the plant's gates had been intercepted and rudely turned away. The Eskimos or whatever they were probably had hid- den cameras.

Gamay and Paul left the car and made their way through the woods parallel to the road for about an eighth of a mile, until they could see the sun glinting off a high chain-link fence. A black cable ran along the top of the fence, indicating that the razor wire was electrified. No cameras were visible, although it was possible that they were disguised.

"What now?" Gamay said.

"We can fish or cut bait," Paul replied.

"I never liked cutting bait."

"Me, neither. Let's fish."

Paul stepped out of the woods into the cleared grassy swath around the fence. His sharp eye noticed a thin, almost-invisible wire at ankle height. He pointed to the ground. Trip wire. He snapped a dead branch off a nearby tree and dropped it on the wire, then he slipped back into the woods. He and Gamay flattened out belly-first on the pine needle carpeting.

Soon they heard the sound of a motor, and a black SUV lumbered to a stop on the other side of the fence. The door opened, and fierce- looking pure white Samoyeds as big as lions lunged out and ran up to the fence. The snuffling dogs were followed a moment later by a swarthy, round-faced guard in a black

uniform. He cradled a leveled assault rifle in his hands.

While the dogs dashed back and forth along the fence, the guard suspiciously eyed the woods. He saw the branch lying on the trip wire. In an unintelligible language, he mumbled into a hand radio, then he moved on. The dogs may have sensed the two human beings in the woods. They growled and stood stiff-legged, staring at the trees that hid the Trouts. The guard yelled at them, and they jumped back into the SUV. Then he drove off.

"Not bad time," Paul said, checking his watch. "Ninety seconds." "Maybe it's time we got out of here," Gamay said. "They'll be sending someone to clear away that branch."

The Trouts melted back into the woods. Walking and trotting, they returned to their rental car. Minutes later, they were on the main road.

Gamay shook her head in wonderment. "That guard, did he look like an Eskimo to you?"

"Yeah, kinda, I guess. Never ran into many Eskimos back on old Cape Cod."

"What's an Eskimo doing this far south, selling Eskimo Pies?"

"The only thing that guy and his puppy dogs were selling was a quick trip to the morgue. Let's see what's going on in the big city."

Gamay nodded, and a few minutes later she was taking the turnoff that led to town. The village was hardly quaint, and she could see why it was only a footnote in the travel guide. The houses were pro- tected against the weather by asphalt shingles of drab green and faded maroon, and the roofs were covered with aluminum to allow the snow to slide off. There were few people or cars around. Some of the shops in the minuscule business section posted signs that said they were closed until further notice, and the town had an abandoned look. The harbor was picturesque, as the tour book said, but it was empty of boats, adding to the town's forlorn aspect.

The fish pier was deserted except for a ragged flock of sleeping gulls. Gamay spotted a restaurant/bar neon sign in a small square building overlooking the harbor. Paul suggested that she grab a table and order him fish and chips while he meandered around and tried to find someone who could tell him about the

Oceanus plant.

Gamay stepped into the yeasty atmosphere of the restaurant and saw that the place was vacant except for a heavyset bartender and one customer. She took a table with a view of the harbor. The bartender came over for her order. Like the people she'd met in the general store, he proved to be a friendly type. He apologized for not having fish and chips, but said the grilled ham and cheese sandwich was pretty good. Gamay said that would be fine and ordered two sandwiches along with a Molson. She liked the Canadian beer because it was stronger than the American brew.

Gamay was sipping her beer, admiring the fly-specked ceiling, the torn-fishnet-and-weathered-lobster-buoy decorations on the wall, when the man sitting at the bar slid off his stool. Apparently, he had taken the sight of an attractive woman drinking alone in a bar at mid- day as an invitation. He sidled over with a beer bottle in his hand and ran his eyes over Camay's red hair and lithe, athletic body. Unable to see her wedding ring because her left hand was resting on her knee, he figured Gamay was fair game.

"Good mornin', " he said, with an amiable smile. "Mind if I join you.

Gamay wasn't put off by the direct approach. She moved well among men because she had a talent for thinking like they do. With her tall, slim figure and long, swirled-up hair, it was hard to believe that Gamay had been a tomboy, running with a gang of boys, build- ing tree houses, playing baseball in the streets of Racine. She was an expert marksman as well, thanks to her father, who'd taught her to shoot skeet.

'Be my guest," Gamay said casually, and waved him into a chair. 'My name's Mike Neal," he said. Neal was in his forties. He was dressed in work clothes and wore shin-high black rubber boots. With his dark, rugged profile and thick, black hair, Neal would have had classic good looks if not for a weakness around the mouth and a ruby nose colored by too much booze. "You sound American." "I am." She extended her hand and introduced herself. "Pretty name," Neal said, impressed by the firmness of Gamay's grip. Like the general store cashier, he said, "Just passing through?"

Gamay nodded. "I've always wanted to see the Maritime Provinces. Are you a fisherman?"

"Yep." He pointed out the window and, with unrestrained pride, said, "That's my beauty over there at the boatyard dock. The Tiffany.

Named her after my old girlfriend. We broke up last year, but it's bad luck to change the name of a boat."

"Are you taking a day off from fishing?"

"Not exactly. Boat shop did some work on my engine. They won't release Tiffany until I pay them. Afraid I'd take off without paying."

"Would you?"

He smirked. "I stung them for a few bucks before." "Still, that seems shortsighted on their part. With your boat, you could go fishing and earn the money to pay them back."

Neal's smile dissolved into a frown. "I could if there were fish to sell."

"Someone at the general store mentioned that the fishing was bad."

"Worse than bad. Rest of the fleet has moved up the coast. Some of the guys come home between trips to see family."

"How long has this been going on?"

" 'Bout six months."

"Any idea what's causing the drought?"

He shrugged. "When we talked to the provincial fisheries people, they said the fish musta moved off, looking for better feeding. They didn't even send someone like we asked. Don't want to get their feet wet, I guess. The marine biologists all must be busy sitting on their fat asses looking at their computers."

"Do you agree with what they said about the fish moving off?" He grinned. "For a tourist, you've got lots of questions." "When I'm not a tourist, I'm a marine biologist." Neal blushed. "Sorry. I wasn't, talking about your fat ass. Oh, hell-"

Gamay laughed. "I know exactly what you mean about computer biologists who

never leave their lab. I think fishermen have more practical knowledge of the sea than any scientist. At the same time, professional expertise doesn't hurt. Maybe I can help you figure out why there are no fish to catch."

A cloud passed over Neal's features. "I didn't say there are no fish.

There are fish all right."

"Then what's the problem?"

"These aren't like any fish I've seen in all my years of fishing." "I don't understand."

Neal shrugged. Apparently this was one subject he didn't want to talk about.

"I've studied fish in and out of the water all over the world," Gamay said. "There isn't much that would surprise me." "Bet this would."

Gamay stuck her hand out. "Okay, it's a bet. How much is your engine repair bill?"

"Seven hundred fifty dollars, Canadian."

"I'll pay that if you show me what you're talking about. Let me buy you a beer to seal the deal."

Neal's unshaven jaw dropped open. "You're serious?" "Very. Look Mike, there are no fences in the ocean. Fish go pretty much where they please. There may be something harmful in these waters that could affect American fishermen as well."

"Okay," he said, shaking her hand. "When can you go?" "How about today?"

Neal grinned like a Cheshire cat. The source of his happiness wasn't hard to figure out. A nice-looking and friendly American woman was paying his boatyard bill and going out on his boat, alone, where he could turn on his rugged charm. Just then, Paul Trout walked into the bar and came over to the table.

"Sorry I took so long," Paul said. "Harbor's pretty deserted."

"This is Mike Neal," Gamay said. "Mike, I'd like you to meet my husband."

Neal glanced up at Trout's nearly seven-foot-tall figure, and his fantasies about Gamay evaporated. But he was a practical man-a deal was a deal. "Pleased to meet you," he said. They shook hands.

"Mike here has agreed to take us out on his boat to show us some unusual fish," Gamay said.

"We can leave in an hour," Neal said. "That'll give you time to eat your lunch. See you over at the boat." He rose from his chair and started to leave.

"Do we need to bring anything?" Paul asked.

"Naw," Neal said. He stopped and said: "Elephant gun, maybe?" He roared with laughter at the Trouts' puzzled expressions. They could still hear him laughing after he passed through the door.

12

WITH HIS LONG-STEMMED pipe, teeth like a broken picket fence and storm-beaten face. Old Eric looked like a grizzled character out of Captains Courageous. Pia said that the retired fisherman spoke English and knew the local waters better than the fish. Now too old to go fishing, he did odd jobs around the pier. De- spite his fierce expression, he was more than obliging when Austin mentioned Pia's name.

Austin had arrived at the fish pier early, looking for advice about local weather and sea conditions. A purple-blue pall from the throaty exhausts of the Skaalshavn fishing fleet hung in the damp air. Fish- ermen decked out in foul-weather gear and boots slogged through the drizzle as they loaded bait buckets and tubs of coiled trawl line on their boats in preparation for a day at sea. He told the old salt he was taking Professor Jorgensen's boat out to go fishing.

Old Eric squinted at the scudding gray clouds and pursed his lips in thought. "Rain should stop, and the fog will burn off soon." He pointed to a tall pillar of rock guarding the harbor entrance. "Go to the starboard of that sea stack. You'll find good fishing after a mile. Wind comes up around midday, but the professor's boat is weatherly. I should know," he said with a gap-toothed grin. "I built her. She'll get you home in one piece."

"How's the fishing the other way along the coast?" The old fisherman wrinkled his nose. "Stinks around the fish farm. A wet ride, too, coming back with a following sea."

Austin thanked Eric for his advice, stowed his day pack and fish- ing gear in the boat, checked the fuel level and ventilated the bilge. The inboard engine started right away and soon settled down to a smooth rumble. Austin cast off the lines, pushed away from the dock and pointed the bow toward the two-hundred-foot-high chimney- shaped rock formation that stood like a stone waterspout at the har- bor entrance. He went to the left rather than to the right of the lofty column, hoping Old Eric wouldn't see him.

Soon, the boat was cruising past towering cliffs where thousands of nesting seabirds soared like wind-blown confetti. The motor purred like a milk-fed kitten. There was a slight chop to the water, but the double-ender sliced rather than slapped its way through the waves. Spray occasionally splashed over the bow. Austin stayed warm and dry in the yellow foul-weather gear and boots he'd found in the boat's storage compartment.

The high ramparts along the coast dissolved into a series of craggy bluffs that dropped down to low hills and finally dipped to sea level as he neared the old harbor. He saw no other boats. The local fish- ermen were working more productive grounds in the other direction. Only when he rounded a point of land did he discover that he was not alone.

The blue-hulled Spanish yacht he had seen entering the harbor the day before lay at anchor in the inlet about a half mile from shore. The sleek boat was more than two hundred feet long. Its low, clean lines suggested that the yacht was built for speed as well as comfort. The name on the stern was Navarra. The decks were deserted. No one came out to wave, as was customary when one boat encountered an- other, particularly in such remote waters. Austin felt unseen eyes watching him from behind the dark-tinted windows as he continued past the yacht toward land. Sunlight shining through the clouds re- flected dully off the distant metal rooftops he had glimpsed from the high ridge the day before.

A dot rose in the sky from the general vicinity of the buildings. The speck rapidly grew in size and became a black helicopter with no markings. The chopper came in low and buzzed the boat like an angry hornet, circled twice,

then hovered, facing Austin, a few hun- dred yards away. Rocket pods hung from the fuselage. More com- pany was on its way. A boat was bearing down on his position. It was moving fast, throwing up fountains of spray as it skimmed the wave- tops. The craft ate up the distance, and Austin saw that it was a low-slung Cigarette boat like the souped-up models favored by Florida drug smugglers.

The boat slowed and made a broadside pass close enough for Austin to get a good look at the three men on board. They were short and stocky and had round faces and swarthy complexions. Their black hair was cut in bangs over their almost Asian eyes. One man stayed at the wheel, while the others watched Austin with an unhealthy interest, their rifles raised to their shoulders.

The boat cut engines and slowed to a stop, and the man at the wheel raised an electronic bullhorn to his lips. He yelled something in what sounded like Faroese. Austin responded with a goofy smile and threw up his hands in the universal gesture of ignorance. The man tried again in Danish, then in English.

"Private property! Keep away." Still playing Mickey the Dunce, Austin maintained the goofy grin.

He held his fishing pole over his head and pointed at it. The un- smiling riflemen did the same thing with their weapons. Austin waved as if to say he understood the silent message. He replaced the fishing pole in its rack, then he gunned the motor, waved a friendly good-bye and aimed the boat out of the harbor.

Glancing over his shoulder a minute later, Austin saw the Ciga- rette boat speeding back toward land. The helicopter sheared off and rapidly outpaced the boat. He passed the yacht again. The decks were still deserted. He continued along the coast toward a headland shaped like a parrot's beak. A few minutes later, he sighted the Mer- maid's Gate at the bottom of a vertical cliff. It was amazingly sym- metrical for a natural arch. The opening was about twenty feet high and slightly narrower in width. It looked like a mouse hole com- pared to the overpowering wall of rough, brownish-black rock.

Despite its lyrical name, the Mermaid's Gate was far from wel- coming. The sea was relatively calm, but waves pounded the fang- shaped rocks on either side and in front of the arch. Spray flew high in the air. The water in front of the opening boiled and swirled with vicious cross-currents, like a giant washing

machine. Over the crash of the sea, Austin heard a hollow soughing issuing from the opening. The hair rose on the back of his neck. The mournful dirge was what he imagined the moans of drowned sailors would sound like. Re- gretfully, he didn't see a single mermaid.

Austin halted the boat a respectable distance from the gate. Any attempt to pass through now would be like trying to thread a needle in a jostling crowd. Austin checked his watch and settled back and munched on the bread and cheese Pia had thoughtfully packed for him. He was finishing his breakfast when he sensed a change in the sea conditions. It was as if King Neptune had waved his trident.

While the water in the immediate vicinity was still restless, the waves no longer exploded against the archway with artillery force. Pia had said that the gate was safely navigable only on either side of a slack current.

He secured all loose objects on the boat, donned his life jacket, spread his legs wide for stability, throttled up and pointed the boat at the gate. Even at slack current, the water around the opening was dimpled by swirling vortexes. He clenched his teeth and prayed that Pia's childhood memory other father's words was accurate. When he was only yards away from the lethal reach of the rocks, he gunned the throttle, aiming slightly to the right, as instructed, although it was dangerously close to the rocks. With inches to spare, the boat slith- ered through the tight opening as easily as an eel.

Making a quick left-hand turn in the domed chamber, he headed toward a narrow cleft in the rocks and entered a canal inches wider than the double-ender. The boat banged against the kelp-covered ledges as it followed the channel in a rough S-course that widened into a circular lagoon the size of a backyard pool. The water's sur- face was black with seaweed, and the smell of the ocean was almost overpowering in the confined space.

Austin pulled the double-ender alongside a ledge and wrapped the mooring line around a rocky knob. He slipped off his life jacket and foul-weather gear, climbed a short flight of natural steps and stepped into an opening shaped like an upside-down keyhole. He was im- mediately buffeted by a musty wind. The air was amplified like a trumpeter's breath as it flowed from the cleft, producing the haunt- ing moan of the dead mariners.

He clicked his flashlight on and followed a tunnel that eventually widened into a

large cave. Three smaller caverns branched off from the main chamber. Painted on the wall next to each opening was a picture of a fish. Remembering Pia's instructions, he entered the cave marked by a sea bream. He soon found himself in a bewildering maze of caves and tunnels. Without the crude markers, he would have become hopelessly lost. After walking a few minutes, he en- tered a high-ceilinged chamber whose walls had been smoothed down and were covered with colorful renderings. He recognized the bison and deer from the drawings Pia's father had made. The ochre and red colors were still vibrant.

The pictures unfolded into a hunting scene that included antelope, wild horses and even a woolly mammoth. Hunters dressed in short kilts were shown attacking their prey with spears and bows and ar- rows. The mural encompassed vignettes of everyday life. There were scenes with people regally dressed in flowing robes, sleek sailing ships, two- and three-story houses of sophisticated architecture. The depiction of mammoths suggested that the drawings went back to Neolithic times, but this was a civilization of the highest order.

Austin followed the sea bream into a series of smaller caves and saw the remains of old fire-pits. He was more concerned with evi- dence of recent human occupation. The murmur of voices came from just ahead. He edged cautiously forward with his back plastered against a wall and peered around a corner into a cave the size of a small warehouse. The space looked like a natural cavern that had been expanded with the help of explosives and jackhammers. Flood- lights hanging from the high ceiling illuminated hundreds of plastic cartons stacked high on wooden pallets.

From the shadows, Austin watched a work crew of a dozen men dressed in black coveralls unload boxes from a forklift and place them on a conveyor belt. The workers were swarthy and dark- skinned, like the men he had seen in the patrol boat. They had straight, jet-black hair cut in bangs, high cheekbones and almond- shaped eyes. They were finishing their task, and after a while, half the work crew drifted out the door and the rest remained a few min- utes to clean up. At a word from a man whose air of authority tabbed him as the boss, they, too, straggled out through a door.

Austin stepped from his hiding place and inspected the writing on the boxes. The words stenciled in several languages identified the contents as refined fish food. He continued past a large freight door set into one wall, probably used to bring the fish food into the ware- house, and made his way toward the door that the

work crew had gone through.

The next room was a nexus for dozens of pipes and pumps that extended from a huge, round bin. Chutes ran up the side of the con- tainer. Austin concluded that the food was poured into chutes, mixed in the tank and conveyed throughout the fish farm by the network of pipes.

He borrowed a pry bar from a tool room next to the mixing area. He hefted the flat metal bar in his hand, thinking it would be about as effective as a feather against automatic weapons, but tucked it in his belt anyhow. Then he followed the feed pipes from the mixing area. The pipes ran through a passageway and ended at a wall with a door in it. Austin cracked open the door, and cold air blew against his face. He listened. Hearing nothing, he stepped into the open. The fresh air felt good after the mustiness of the caverns.

After exiting through the other side of the wall, the pipes contin- ued and ran down a broad, white, gravel-covered alley that sepa- rated two rows of buildings placed parallel to each other. Smaller pipes branched out from the main conduit into the buildings. The one-story structures were built of cinder block and had roofs of cor- rugated steel. The air was heavy with the smell offish, and the low hum of machinery came from every direction.

Austin went over to the nearest building and found the steel door unlocked. Oceanus probably didn't expect prowlers to get past its boats and helicopter. The interior, lit by low-level ceiling lights, was in semi-darkness. The hum he had heard came from electrical mo- tors powering the pumps that circulated water in rows of large blue plastic tanks. They were lined up on either side of a center aisle that ran the length of the building. The tanks were serviced by water mains, feed pipes, pumpsvalves and electrical connections. Austin climbed a metal ladder up the side of one tank. The beam from his flashlight stirred up hundreds of startled fish, each no bigger than a finger.

He climbed down, slipped out of the fish nursery and worked his way from building to building. The structures were identical except for differences in the size and species of the fish they housed. He rec- ognized salmon, cod and other familiar types in the holding tanks. A centrally located smaller building housed a central computer cen- ter. It was unoccupied. He watched the blinking dials and gauges on the central panel and realized why he had seen few people in his travels. The fish farm was almost totally automated.

As he was emerging from the computer center, he heard the crunch of boots. He dodged around a corner as two guards strolled by. The men had their weapons slung on their shoulders, and they were laughing at some shared joke, never suspecting that an intruder lurked in their midst.

After the guards had passed, Austin made his way to the harbor. A pier that was long enough to accommodate large ships extended from the rocky shoreline. Tied up to the dock was the patrol boat that had intercepted him earlier. There was no sign of the helicopter. The tops of hundreds of fish cages were visible along the harbor's edge. Men in open boats were tending the fish cages under a cloud of noisy gulls. More guards lolled on the dock, idly watching the action.

Austin checked his watch. He had to leave right away if he ex- pected to get back to the Mermaid's Gate before the end of slack cur- rent. He circled around the complex and came upon a building similar to the others except that it was set off by itself. Warning signs were posted on the outside. He bypassed a main door and found a sec- ondary entrance on the other side. Unlike the doors to the other fish nurseries, this one was locked.

Using the pry bar, Austin sprung the lock as quietly as possible and pushed the door open. In the dim interior light, he saw that the tanks were twice the size of those he'd seen earlier, and there were half as many. Something about the place bothered him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. For the first time since he'd begun his explorations, his skin began to crawl.

He wasn't alone in the building. A single guard was strolling around the perimeter of the tanks. He timed the guard, waited until he was at the far end of his patrol, then set the pry bar down, climbed a ladder up the side of the nearest tank and peered over the edge.

The smell offish was even stronger than the odor emanating from the smaller tanks in the other buildings. He leaned over and heard the soft swish of swirling water. The tank was occupied. He pointed the flashlight to see what was inside, and the water exploded. There was a blurry flash of white and a gaping mouth lined with sharp teeth. Austin jerked back in reflex. Something wet and slimy grazed his head. He lost his hold and fell off the ladder. His flailing hands grabbed a section of plastic hose, breaking it, and he crashed to the concrete floor. Water poured from the broken hose. He scrambled to his feet, and through

dazed eyes he saw a red light flashing above the tank. He swore to himself. The systems failure had set off an alarm.

The guard had heard the ruckus and was running his way. Austin ducked into a space between two tanks, nearly tripping on a stack of metal pipe. The guard ran past Austin and stopped when he saw the gushing water. Austin picked up a short length of metal pipe and stepped out behind the guard. The man must have sensed Austin's presence. He half-turned and went to unsling his rifle, but the pipe came down on his head and he crumpled to the floor.

With the immediate threat disposed of, Austin's first instinct was to cut and run, but he decided to create a diversion first. Wielding the pipe as a sledgehammer, he methodically smashed several plastic pipe assemblies. Red alarm lights blinked over several tanks now, and water from the damaged pipes poured onto the floor and created a river.

Austin splashed through the puddles toward the door. The rush of water had drowned out other sounds, and he didn't hear the pounding footsteps of a second man. They met at an intersection be- tween two lines of tanks, almost crashing into each other like a cou- ple of circus clowns. The comic aspect was intensified when they both slipped and went down. But Austin had no reason to laugh when the man sprang to his feet and yanked a pistol from a holster at his belt.

Austin swung the pipe as he rose to a standing position, and the pistol went flying. The man's eyes widened with surprise at Austin's quickness. He reached under the shirt of his black uniform and pulled out a knife with a long blade made from a hard white mate- rial. He stepped back, taking up a defensive position. In that second instant, Austin had a chance to study his opponent.

The man was about a head shorter than Austin. His head seemed to sit directly on muscular shoulders that hinted at the power in the squat body. Like the guards, he had a wide, round face with bangs, and almond-shaped eyes that were as black and hard as obsidian. Vertical tattoos decorated his high cheekbones. Beneath the flat nose were wide, fleshy lips. He spread that mouth in a toothy smile, but there was no mirth in it, only cruelty.

Austin was in no mood for a smiling contest. Time was not on his side. More guards could show up at any second. He couldn't retreat. He had to dispatch this obstacle and pray there weren't others. His hands tightened on the pipe. His eyes

must have given away his in- tentions, because the man lunged without warning. He moved with scorpion-speed despite his thickset body. Austin felt a stinging pain on the left side of his rib cage. He had been holding the pipe like a Louisville Slugger, and the knife had slipped inside his guard. Austin felt a wetness where the blade had sliced through his sweater and shirt.

The man's smile grew wider, and the blood-tipped knife was poised for another slashing attack. He feinted to his left. Austin re- acted with pure reflex and swung the pipe as if he were hitting a home run. There was a sickening scrunch sound as the pipe con- nected with the man's nose, crushing bone and cartilage. Blood sprayed as if from a fountain. Austin couldn't believe it! After a blow that would have felled a steer, the man was still on his feet. A dazed look came into the man's eyes, and a second later, the knife fell from his limp fingers and he collapsed to the floor.

Austin began sprinting for the exit, but he heard shouts and ducked behind a fish tank. Several guards burst through the door and ran to- ward the blinking red lights. Austin stuck his head out and heard ex- cited voices coming from the direction of the harbor. He stepped out into the open, sprinted around the side of the building and returned to the main complex offish nurseries. With most of the attention fo- cused on the damage he had left behind him, Austin was able to make his way to the fish-food warehouse.

Austin was relieved to see that the warehouse was still deserted. Soon he could lose himself in the labyrinth of caves. He had his hand tight against his chest, but he couldn't stanch the bleeding completely. Even worse, he was leaving a trail of blood droplets. A siren wailed in the distance. He was trotting past the forklift when a thought struck him. He was making it too easy for these guys.

He slid into the forklift seat, started the motor, aimed the tines at a tall stack of food cartons and nailed the accelerator. The vehicle lurched forward and smashed into the boxes with enough force to topple them. The boxes crashed onto the conveyor belt and blocked the opening. He knocked over a couple more piles in front of the ac- cess and freight doors. As a finishing touch, he jammed a tine into the control box for the conveyor belt.

Moments later, he was hurrying through the caverns. He paused in the main picture gallery and listened. He could hear yells over his own heavy breathing. An even worse sound was the barking of dogs. His crude barricade had been

breached. He continued at a measured trot, following the bobbing bull's-eye of the flashlight. In his haste, he mistook one fish marker for another and lost precious moments finding his way back. The shouts and barks were louder now, and he could see the phantasmagoric glow of lights behind him. The caves amplified and echoed the voices, creating the impression that a whole army was after him.

The stutter of an automatic weapon echoed throughout the caves. Austin dove for the floor, and a hail of bullets splattered harmlessly against the walls. He tried to ignore the searing pain of his chest wound and scrambled to his feet. Another fusillade raked the pas- sageway, but by then he was around a curve and the angled wall pro- tected him. Seconds later, he was squeezing through the last narrow passageway, then he was out and climbing down the natural staircase to the boat.

When he tried to start the engine, it coughed. He reached down into the cold water with his right hand, cleaned the seaweed that had tangled the propeller and tried the starter again. This time, the motor responded. As he pulled away and pointed the boat toward the canal that would take him back to the Mermaid's Gate, two black-clad fig- ures climbed down to the edge of the pool. The beams from their flashlights caught him, but they also illuminated the canal opening.

Austin aimed for the cleft and slammed against the sides of the canal, tearing off hunks of wood. He saw gray daylight ahead, and then the boat burst into the Mermaid's Gate. He snapped the wheel over. The boat made a sharp right turn toward the opening, but the slack current was ending and the devilish confluence of tides and cur- rents had returned. The boat slid sideways down the side of a wave and headed for a wood-splintering collision with the far wall, only to be saved when another billow pitched it back toward the canal opening.

Austin gunned the throttle, trying to gain control. The boat skid- ded as if it were riding on banana peels. He gave the wheel a quick jerk to avoid crashing into a jagged outcropping that would have sliced the boat in two. The propeller tinged against an underwater ledge. He brought the boat around again, but the waves caught him in another game ofFrisbee toss. The double-ender lost headway and was pushed backward into the grotto. Austin gauged the ebb and flow of the circulating water and in desperation aimed for a V that marked a calmer area between currents.

As the boat fishtailed toward the opening, Austin saw that he had company. His pursuers had made their way along the ledges that bordered the canal. They stood on the rocks only yards away from where he was about to pass.

One of the men aimed his rifle at Austin, who was an easy target, but his companion pushed the barrel down. He undipped a hand grenade from his belt, tossed it lightly in the air a few times like a baseball pitcher warming up, then as Austin passed, the man pulled the pin, holding down on the lever. Austin's eyes glanced from the grenade and into the merciless face of the man who had stabbed him. His nose was a bloody pulp and streams of blood had caked on his cheeks. He must have been in terrible pain, but the face broadened into a wide grin as he leisurely lofted the grenade into Austin's boat. Then he and the other man ducked behind an outcropping of rocks and covered their ears.

The arcing grenade clunked into the boat, landing practically at

Austin's feet. Austin wrung the last bit of torque out of the engine. The boat planed at a sharp angle, and the grenade rolled down the deck until it lodged against the narrow transom.

The boat burst through the arch into the open water. Choosing be- tween the devil and the deep blue sea, Austin instinctively chose the latter: A part of his brain made the choice between being blown to bits instantaneously and freezing to death in a few minutes. He launched his body off the boat.

He plunged into the frigid water, and, a second later, heard the muffled thud of the grenade, then the fuel tanks erupted in a sec- ondary explosion. Austin stayed under as long as he could and sur- faced under a rainfall of wood splinters. The boat was gone, and he dove again to avoid the burning fuel that floated on the water's sur- face. When he came up a second time, he was numb with cold, but the survival instinct burned in his chest. He started to swim in the di- rection of land, but he had taken only a few more strokes before his joints felt as if someone had poured liquid oxygen into them.

Over the wave-tops, he caught a blurred glimpse of a boat speed- ing his way: His pursuers were no doubt coming to finish off the job. A gurgled laugh escaped from his throat. By the time they ar- rived, he'd be nothing but a giant Slurpee.

SECONDS BEFORE HE slipped below the surface, however, Austin's one-way trip to Davey Jones's locker was cut short. A hand reached over the side of the launch and grabbed him by the hair. His teeth clacked like a pair of castanets, and his scalp felt as if it were being pulled out by the roots. Then other hands were grabbing him by the armpits and collar, and he was hauled from the sea, sputter- ing and coughing, like a kitten in a well.

His legs were still dangling in the water when the motor launch took off and raced over the waves with a roar of jet propulsion en- gines, its bow high in the air. Through blurred vision, Austin saw, to his surprise, that they were swinging alongside the blue yacht. Semi-conscious, he was passed up to the deck and carried to what must be the sick bay, where he was relieved of his soggy clothes, wrapped in warm towels and examined by a frowning man with a stethoscope. Then he was thrust into a sauna, where, eventually, he could move his fingers and toes. He was examined a second time and given a blue fleece sweat suit to wear. Apparently, he was going to live.

His transition from near-death to near-life was accomplished under the watchful eye of two men, built like professional wrestlers, who spoke to each other in Spanish. The same guard dogs escorted him as he walked on rubber legs to a luxurious stateroom. They set- tled him into a comfortable reclining chair, covered him with a soft blanket and left him to rest.

Austin fell into an exhausted sleep. When he awakened, he saw

that he was under scrutiny by a pair of dark eyes. A man sat in an armchair, watching him from a few feet away, as if he were a speci- men on a lab slide.

The man grinned when he saw Austin's eyelids flutter. "Good. You're awake," he said. His voice was deep and resonant, and he spoke American English with only a hint of an accent.

The man reached over to a side table for a silver-plated flask and poured Austin a drink. With shaking fingers, Austin swirled the greenish-yellow amber liquor around in the bottom of the brandy snifter, breathed in the heavy fumes and took a deep sip. The fiery herbal liquor trickled down his throat, and its warmth spread throughout his body.

Austin glanced at the flask. "This tastes too good to be antifreeze, but the effect

is the same."

The man chuckled and took a swig from the flask. "Green Izarra is one hundred proof," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's usually served in glasses hardly bigger than your thumb. I thought a little extra might be of benefit in your case. How is your wound?"

Austin's hand reached down and touched his ribs. He could feel the stiffness of a bandage under his shirt, but there was no pain, even when he pressed with his fingers. He remembered the flash of white as the ivory knife slashed his flesh.

"How bad was it?"

"Another half-inch deeper and we would have been burying you at sea." The grim assessment was accompanied by a grin. "It feels okay."

"My ship's doctor is an expert in treating trauma. He sewed you up and froze the wound."

Austin glanced around at his surroundings, his memories return- ing. "Ship's doctor? This is the blue yacht, isn't it?"

"That's right. My name is Balthazar Aguirrez. This is my boat." With his barrel chest and large hands, Aguirrez looked more like a longshoreman than the owner of a yacht that was probably worth several million dollars. He had a broad forehead and thick black eye- brows over a strong nose, a wide mouth that curved upward in a natural grin, and a chin like a granite ledge. His eyes were the purple- black of ripe olives. He wore a light-blue sweat suit identical to the

one on loan to Austin. A black beret was perched at a jaunty angle on his thick pepper-and-salt hair.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Aguirrez. My name is Kurt Austin. Thanks for your hospitality."

Aguirrez extended his hand in a bone-crunching grip. "Think nothing of it, Mr. Austin. We like to entertain guests." His dark eyes danced with amusement. "Most arrive on board in a

more conventional manner, however. May I pour you another Izarra?"

Austin waved it off. He wanted to keep a clear head. "Perhaps after you have some food. Are you hungry?"

Austin had worked up an appetite since the bread and cheese he'd eaten for brunch. "Yes, now that you mention it. I wouldn't mind a sandwich."

"I would be a poor host if I could not do better than a sandwich.

If you feel well enough, I'd like you to join me for a light meal in the salon."

Austin levered himself out of the chair and stood, somewhat shak- ily. "I'll be fine."

Aguirrez said, "Splendid. I'll give you a few minutes. Come when you're ready." He rose and left the cabin. Austin stared at the closed door and shook his head. His brain still felt waterlogged. He was weak from blood loss. He went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He looked like a commercial for ghoul makeup. Not sur- prising after being stabbed, shot at and blown out of the water. He washed his face with cold, then hot, water. Noticing an electric shaver, he removed the stubble on his chin. When he stepped back into the stateroom, he saw he had company.

The tough-faced stewards who had escorted him earlier were wait- ing. One opened the door and led the way, while the other man took up the rear. The walk gave Austin ample opportunity to exercise, and he felt his legs grow stronger with every step. They came to the main deck salon, and one of the men motioned for Austin to enter. Then he and the other man left him alone.

Austin stepped into the salon and raised his eyebrows. He had been on dozens of yachts and had found the decor to be similar. Chrome and leather and clean contemporary lines were the norm. But the Navarras salon resembled the interior of a southern European farmhouse.

The eggshell-white walls and ceiling were of stucco, inlaid with rough-hewn beams, and the floor was a red tile. A fire was crackling in a large, stone fireplace that had been built into one wall. Over the mantle was a painting of men playing a game Austin recognized as jai alai. He went up to a still-life painting of assorted fruit and was examining the signature when a deep voice said, "Interested in art, Mr. Austin?"

Aguirrez had come up from behind without making a sound. Austin said, "I collect dueling pistols, which I think of as a form of art."

"Without question! Deadly art is still art. I picked up that Cezanne for my little collection last year. The other pieces I found at auction or acquired from private sources."

Austin strolled past the Gauguins, a Degas, Manets and Monets. The "little collection" was more extensive than that found in many museums. He moved to another wall that was covered with large photographs.

"These are originals, too?"

"A few of my holdings," Aguirrez said, with a shrug. "Ship- building yards, steel mills and so forth." He sounded like a jaded waiter rattling off items on a menu. "But enough of business." He took Austin by the arm. "Dinner is ready."

He led the way through sliding doors into an elegant dining room. At the center of the room was an oval mahogany table set for twelve. Aguirrez removed his beret and, with a snap of his wrist and great accuracy, flung it to a chair across the room. He gestured grandly to- ward the two opposite chairs at one end of the table. As the two men

took their seats, a waiter appeared from nowhere and poured their tall goblets full of wine.

"I think you will like this sturdy Spanish Rioja," Aguirrez said. He raised his glass. "To art."

"To the master and crew of the Navarra "You're very gracious," Aguirrez said with obvious approval. "Ah good," he said, his eyes lighting up. "I see that our feast is about to begin.

There were no appetizers, and they dug right into the main course, a hearty bean, pepper and pork-rib dish served with cabbage. Austin complimented the chef and asked what the dish was.

"This is called alubias de tolosa" Aguirrez said, downing his food with gusto. "We Basques treat it with an almost mystical reverence."

"Basque. Of course. Navarra is a Basque province. Then there's the jai alai painting. And the black beret."

"I'm impressed, Mr. Austin! You seem to know a great deal about my people."

"Anyone interested in the sea knows that the Basques were the greatest explorers, sailors and shipbuilders in the world."

Aguirrez clapped his hands. "Bravo." He refilled Austin's wine- glass and leaned forward. "Tell me, what is your interest in the sea?" He maintained his ferocious grin, but pinioned Austin with a pene- trating gaze.

Austin admired the way Aguirrez had subtly managed the con- versational shift. Until he knew his host better and learned why the blue yacht was hanging out near the Oceanus fish farm, Austin planned to play his cards close to his vest.

"I'm a salvage specialist," he said. "I've been working on a project in the Faroes. I came to Skaalshavn to do some fishing."

Aguirrez sat back and roared with laughter. "Excuse my bad man- ners," he said with tears in his eyes. "But it was my men who fished you from the sea."

Austin's mouth widened in a sheepish grin. "A cold swim wasn't in my plans."

Aguirrez became serious again. "From what we saw, there was an explosion on your boat."

"The ventilation for the engine compartment was insufficient, and gasoline vapors collected. It happens sometimes with inboards," Austin said.

Aguirrez nodded. "Strange. In my experience, explosions of that type usually happen when a boat has been sitting at the dock. And your wound undoubtedly was caused by flying metal."

"Undoubtedly," Austin said with a poker face, knowing full well that the ship's doctor would have seen that there were no burn marks on his skin and his wound was too neat to be from a jagged hunk of metal. Austin didn't know why Aguirrez was playing verbal cat- and-mouse, but he went along with the game. "I was lucky you were nearby."

Nodding soberly, Aguirrez said, "We watched your earlier en- counter with the patrol boat and saw you head along the coast. When we rounded the point later, you had vanished. Not long after that, you burst from that sea cave like a man shot from a cannon." He clapped his big hands together. "Boom! Your boat was in pieces and you were in the water."

"That about sums it up," Austin said, with a faint smile. After offering Austin a short, thick cigar, which he refused, Aguir- rez lit up a dark stogie that smelled like a toxic waste site. "So my friend," he said, blowing smoke through his nostrils. "Did you get into the caves?"

"Caves?" Austin feigned innocence.

"For God's sakes, man, that's why I'm here, to find the caves. Surely you must have wondered what my boat is doing in this God- forsaken place."

"It had occurred to me."

"Then allow me to explain. I have done very well with my busi- nesses.

An understatement. You're very fortunate. Congratulations.

"Thank you. My wealth gives me the means and the time to do whatever I like. Some men choose to spend their fortune on beauti- ful young women. I choose to be an amateur archaeologist."

"Ambitious hobbies in either case." "I still enjoy the company of beautiful women, especially if they are intelligent. But with me, the past is more than a hobby." He looked as if he were about to spring from his chair. "It is my passion. As you said earlier, the Basques were great men of the sea. They pioneered the cod and whale fisheries off North America decades before Columbus. An ancestor of mine, Diego Aguirrez, profited from this trade."

"He would be proud to see his descendant has carried on his legacy."

"You're more than kind, Mr. Austin. He was a man of great courage and unyielding principle, qualities that got him in trouble with the Spanish Inquisition. He angered one of the more ruthless Inquisitors."

"Then he was executed?" Aguirrez smiled. "He was resourceful, as well. Diego saw his wife and children to safety. I am a direct descendant of his eldest son. Family tradition says he escaped in one of his ships, but his fate is a mystery."

"The sea is full of unsolved puzzles." Aguirrez nodded. "Nevertheless, he left tantalizing clues that show he intended to put himself far beyond the reach of the Inqui- sition. The traditional North American route for the Basques in- cluded a stopover here in the Faroes. So I began to explore that link. You know the origins of the name Skaalshavn?"

"I've been told it means 'Skull Harbor.' "

Aguirrez smiled and rose from the table to extract an ornately carved wooden box from a cabinet. He unlatched the top and pulled out a skull, cradling it in one hand like Hamlet contemplating Yorick. "This is from one of those caves. I've had it looked at by ex- perts. It has distinct Basque characteristics." He tossed the skull to Austin as if it were a ball, probably hoping to shock him.

Austin caught the skull neatly and spun it in his hand like a ge- ographer studying a globe of the world. "Maybe it's your ancestor Diego." He tossed the skull back.

"I wondered the same thing and had it tested for DNA. This gen- tleman and I are not related, I'm sad to say." Aguirrez put the skull back into the box and rejoined Austin at the table. "This is my sec- ond visit here. The first time, I expected that the caves would be ac- cessible from land. I was dismayed to learn that the harbor and cave area had been purchased for use as a fish farm. I located a man who had worked in demolition when the farm was set up. He said that when the owners were blasting out rock to create storage space, they broke through to the caves. I tried to persuade the owners to let me conduct archaeological explorations, but they refused. I pulled every string I could think of, but even with my connections, Oceanus wouldn't budge. So I came back for another look."

"You're very persistent."

"This has become a quest. Which is why I'm interested in your ad- venture. I suspected the natural arch might provide entry into the caves, but the waters around them were too dangerous for our launches. Apparently, you found a way to get in."

"Dumb luck," Austin said briefly.

Aguirrez chuckled. "I think it was more than luck. Please, tell me what you saw. I will bribe you with more wine."

He snapped his fingers. The waiter brought a new bottle, opened it and refilled their glasses.

"No bribe is necessary," Austin said. "Consider it partial repay- ment for your hospitality and the fine meal." He sipped from his glass, enjoying the buildup of suspense. "You're right, there is a way into the caves through the arch. The locals call it the 'Mer- maid's Gate.' The cave network is quite extensive. I only saw part of it."

Austin went into detail about the cave art, saying nothing about his side trip into the fish farm. Aguirrez hung on every word.

"Similar Paleolithic paintings dating back twelve thousand years have been found on the walls of caves in Basque country," he mur- mured at one point. "The other drawings indicate that an advanced civilization must have used the caves."

"That was my impression. Supposedly, the Faroes were uninhab- ited before the Irish monks and the Vikings settled here. Maybe the historians were wrong."

"I wouldn't be surprised. The scholars have no idea where my

people came from. Our language has no antecedents in Europe or Asia. Basques have the highest percentage ofRH-negative blood type in the world, leading some to speculate that we go directly back to Cro-Magnon man." He banged his fist lightly on the table. "I'd give anything to get into those caves."

"You saw the warm reception I got." "You seem to have stirred up a hornet's nest. While you slept, the patrol boats came out from shore and demanded permission to come aboard. We refused, of course."

"The boat I saw had a couple of men with automatic rifles."

Aguirrez waved toward the art hanging on the wall. "When they saw that my

men outgunned and outnumbered them, they quickly left."

"They had a helicopter, too. It was armed with rockets."

"Oh yes, that," he said, as if he were talking about a pesky gnat.

"I had my men brandish their handheld surface-to-air missiles, and the helicopter stopped bothering us."

Missiles and automatic weapons. The Navarra was armed like a warship.

Aguirrez read Austin's mind. "Wealthy men can be a target for kidnappers. The Navarra would be fair game for pirates, so I have made sure it is not exactly toothless. Of necessity, I have surrounded myself with loyal and well-armed men."

/Why do you suppose Oceanus is so prickly about people poking into its business?" Austin said. "We're talking about a fish farm, not diamond mines."

"I asked myself the same question," Aguirrez said, with a shrug.

One of the men who had kept watch over Austin came into the dining room. He handed Aguirrez a plastic bag and whispered into his ear.

Aguirrez nodded and said, "Thank you for being so forthcoming about your visit to the caves, Mr. Austin. Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"I wouldn't mind a lift back to the village."

"Done. My man has informed me that we are passing the sea stack and should be anchoring in a few minutes." He handed the plastic bag over. "Your clothes and personal effects have been drying out."

Austin was ushered back to his cabin so he could change. The bag also held his wallet, which contained his NUMA photo ID card prominently displayed in its plastic window. Aguirrez was a cool one. He would have known that Austin's story about being in ma- rine salvage was made out of whole cloth, yet he'd never let on. In- side the bag was a business card with his host's name and a telephone number. Austin tucked the card into his wallet.

Aguirrez was waiting on deck to say good-bye.

"I appreciate your hospitality," Austin said, shaking hands with his host. "I hope I'm not being rude having to eat and run."

"Not at all," Aguirrez said, with an enigmatic smile. "I wouldn't be surprised if our paths crossed again."

"Stranger things have happened," Austin said, with a grin. Moments later, Austin was in the launch heading across the quiet harbor.

14

TWO THOUSAND FEET above Skaalshavn harbor, the Bell 206 Jet Ranger helicopter that had been tracking the yacht along the coast came to a hover and focused its Wescam high- resolution surveillance camera on the launch making its way to shore. The man in the pilot's seat stared at a video monitor, watching as a lone passenger disembarked from the boat.

The helicopter pilot had a pie-shaped face with high cheekbones marked with vertical tattoo lines. His coal-black hair was cut in bangs over his low forehead, characteristics that might lead a casual ob- server to take him for a native of the northern tundra. But the fea- tures normally associated with the Eskimo were distorted. In place of a pleasant smile was a cruel, leering expression. Eyes that should have twinkled with innocent good humor were as hard as black di- amonds. The brownish-red skin was pockmarked, as if the corrup- tion within had seeped through the pores. The hastily applied band- age taped across the man's crushed nose intensified the grotesque image.

'We have the target in view," he said with a nasal snarl, speaking in an ancient language that had its origins under the aurora borealis.

The electronic signal from the camera, which was housed in a pod beneath the cockpit, was converted into microwaves and transmitted instantaneously to the other side of the globe to a darkened room, where pale-gray eyes watched the same picture seen from the heli- copter.

"I can see him quite clearly," the gray-eyed man said. His silky voice was quiet and cultured, but it had the sullen menace of a rattle- snake. "Who is this person who violated our security so easily?"

"His name is Kurt Austin." A pause. "The same Austin who rescued the Danish sailors from their sunken ship?"

"Yes, great Toonook. He is a marine engineer with the National Underwater and Marine Agency."

"Are you certain ? A mere engineer wouldn't have been so bold or resourceful as to penetrate our facility. And why would NUMA be interested in our operation?"

"I don't know, but our watcher has verified his identity." "And the yacht that picked him up and drove off your men. Is it a NUMA vessel?"

"As far as we know, it is private, of Spanish registry. We're check- ing on the ownership through our sources in Madrid."

"See that it is done speedily. What is the latest damage report at our facility?"

"One guard dead. We were able to repair the damaged pipes and save the prime specimens."

"The guard deserved to die for being careless. I want the speci- mens moved to Canada immediately. Our experiments are too vital to be jeopardized."

"Yes, great Toonook."

"An idiot can see what has happened. Mr. Austin has somehow drawn a connection between Oceanus and the collision we so con- veniently arranged."

"That's impossible-"

"The evidence is in front of your eyes, Umealiq. Don't argue with it. You must deal with the situation!"

The pilot tightened his grip on the controls, ready to send the hel- icopter swooping down like an eagle. The cruel eyes watching the monitor screen followed the figure making its way from the fish pier to the parked car. Within seconds, he could launch his rockets or spray the target with flesh-shredding machine-gun fire and obliterate the life of a bothersome man. The thin lips widened in a cruel smile.

"Should we kill Austin while we have him in our sights?"

"Do I detect a yearning to avenge the damage to your precious nose?" The voice had a mocking tone to it. Without waiting for an answer, he said, "I should kill him for the trouble he has caused me. Had he allowed the Danish sailors to die, the revulsion of the world would be directed at SOS and the attention of the press diverted away from Oceanus."

"I will do it now-"

"AW Don't be impatient. We must not attract any more attention to his demise than necessary."

"He is staying at an isolated cottage. It would be the perfect place.

We could drop his body off a cliff."

"Thenjw to it. But make it look like an accident. Austin must not be allowed to broadcast his findings to the world. Our plans are at a critical stage."

"I will return to the base and organize our men. I will see that Austin enjoys a lingering death, that he experiences fear and pain as the life drains from his body, that-"

"No. Have someone else do it. I have other plans for you. You must leave for Canada immediately to make sure the specimens get there safely, then you are to go to Washington and eliminate that Senator who opposes our legislation. I have arranged cover for you and your men."

The pilot glanced with fierce longing at the monitor and touched the tender mush that was his nose. "As you wish," he said with re- luctance.

His hands played over the cyclic pitch control, and a moment later the hovering helicopter darted off in the direction of the old harbor.

Unaware how close he had come to a violent end, Austin sat behind the steering wheel of Professor Jorgensen's Volvo, contemplating his next move. He was wary of the remote location of the cottage. He gazed at the warm lights of the town, then grabbed his duffel and left the car. He walked into the village without

encountering a soul and went up to the house behind the church.

Pia beamed when she opened the door at his knock and invited him inside. The exertions of the day must have been apparent in his face. When he stepped into the light, her smile disappeared. "Are you all right?" she said, with concern in her voice.

"Nothing a glass ofalamt couldn't help."

Clucking like a mother hen, she ushered him to the kitchen table, poured him a tall glass ofafavit, then watched as he drank. "Well?" she said finally. "Did you catch many fish?"

"No, but I went to visit the mermaids."

Pia let out a whooping laugh, clapped her hands and poured him a couple more fingers of liquor. "I lew it!" she said, with excitement in her voice. "And were the caves as wonderful as my father said?"

She listened like a child as Austin described his entry through the Mermaid's Gate at slack tide and his journey into the cave network. He told her that he would have stayed longer but men with guns chased him away. Cursing impressively in Faroese, she said, "You can't go back to the cottage tonight. Gunnar says he doesn't work for those people, but I think he does."

"I was wondering the same thing. I left the car at the fish pier. Maybe I should leave town."

"God, no! You'll drive off the road into the sea. No, you will stay here tonight and leave early tomorrow."

"Are you sure you want a gentleman staying the night? People will talk," Austin said with a broad smile.

She grinned back, eyes sparkling with childlike mischief. "I hope so."

Shortly before dawn, Austin awakened and got up from the sofa. Pia heard him stir and rose to make him a breakfast. She cooked an industrial-sized potato omelet with smoked fish and pastry on the side. Then she packed him a lunch of cold cuts, cheese and apple and sent him on his way, first eliciting a promise to

return.

The town was coming alive as he made his way in the damp morn- ing air to the fish pier. A couple of fishermen on their way to work waved at him from their trucks as he was opening the car door. The keys slipped from his fingers as he waved back-and when he bent to pick them up, his nostrils picked up a chemical smell, and he de- tected a soft splat-splat sound. He got down on his knees and peered under the car, where the odor was even stronger. Fluid dripped where the brake hoses had been cleanly cut. Austin grunted to him- self softly, then he went over to the fish pier and asked around for a aood mechanic. The harbormaster said he would call, and before long a lanky, middle-aged man showed up.

After inspecting the damage, the mechanic stood and handed Austin a section of the hose. "Somebody don't like you."

"No chance it was an accident?"

The taciturn Faroese pointed to where the road out of town skirted a cliff, and he shook his head. "I figure you'd be flying with the birds up there on the first curve. No problem to fix, though."

The mechanic repaired the brakes in short order. When Austin went to pay him, he waved away the money. "That's okay, you're a friend ofPia's."

Austin said, "The people who did this might know I was at Pia's. I wonder if I should talk to the police."

"No such thing here. Don't worry, the whole town will keep close watch on her."

Austin thanked him again, and minutes later he was driving out of town. As he surveyed the sea stack in his rear view mirror, he men- tally ticked off the events of his short stay in Skaalshavn. He was leav- ing town with more questions than answers. Look on the bright side, he told himself with a grin. He had made some terrific new friends.

15

PAUL TROUT STEPPED onto the deck of Neals wooden- hulled trawler and appraised the boat with an expert eye. What he found surprised him. Neal was a

charming conniver and a drunk, but he was a no-nonsense fisherman who took pride in his boat. The signs offender care were everywhere. Woodwork gleamed with fresh paint. The deck was scrubbed clean of oil stains. Rust was kept under control. The pilothouse had the latest in fish-finding and naviga- tional equipment.

When Trout complimented Neal on the condition of his boat, the fisherman beamed like a father who'd been told his firstborn was his spitting image. Soon he and Neal were swapping sea stories. At one point, when Neal was out of hearing, Gamay raised an eyebrow and said, "You and Mike appear to be getting along swimmingly. I sup- pose you'll be trading recipes before long."

"He's an interesting guy. Look at this boat. It's as well-found as anything I've ever been on."

"Glad to hear you say that. NUMA now owns a piece of Tiffany."

The ransom to spring the trawler from the boatyard had been closer to a thousand dollars than to seven hundred fifty. After a quick fuel-tank fill-up, which Gamay also paid for, Neal set the trawler on a course that would take it into the open sea.

"Fishin' ground's not far," Neal yelled over the throb of the engine.

" 'Bout seven miles. Ten fathoms. Bottom's smooth as a baby's behind.

Prime for trawling. Be there shortly."

After a while, Neal checked his GPS position, cut the throttle to an idle and lowered the net-a conical mesh bag, around a hundred- and-fifty-feet long, designed to be dragged along the sea bottom. The boat made two sets and caught lots of seaweed, but no fish.

"This is very strange," Trout said, inspecting the cod end, the nar- row pouch at the end of the net where harvested fish are concen- trated. "I can understand hauling in a poor catch, but it's highly unusual to bring in nothing. Not even trash fish. The net's absolutely empty."

A knowing grin crossed Neal's face. "You may wish it stayed empty."

The net was lowered again, pulled along the bottom and slowly winched back onto the boat. A boom was used to hoist the cod end over the deck where any catch could be emptied out. This time, something was thrashing wildly in the net. Flashes of silvery-white scales were visible through the tangle of mesh, as a large fish fiercely struggled to free itself. Neal yelled out a warning as he prepared to empty the contents of the net onto the deck.

"Stand way back, folks, we've got a live one!"

The big fish landed on the deck with a squishy thud. Freed from the net, it became even more ferocious in its exertions, skittering across the deck as it arched and snapped its long body, round eyes staring with an unfishlike malevolence, mouth wide and snapping at air. The creature slammed into the fish hold, a raised box built into the deck. Far from slowing it down, the impact seemed to make it angrier. The convulsions became more violent, and it scudded back across the slippery deck.

"Wha-hoo!" Neal yelled, quickly stepping out of the way of the biting jaws. He lowered a gaff handle near the fish's head. In a snap- ping blur, the fish bit the handle in two.

Paul watched, spellbound, from the raised safety of a pile of net- ting. Gamay had taken out a video camera and was busy filming.

"That's the biggest salmon I've ever seen!" Paul said. The fish was about five feet long.

"This is crazy," Gamay said, holding the camera steady. "Salmon don't act like this when they're caught. They've got weak teeth that would break if they tried to do anything like that."

"Tell that to the damned fish/7 Neal said, holding up the jagged end of the gaff handle. He tossed it aside and grabbed a pitchfork, speared the fish behind the gills and pinned it to the deck. The fish continued to struggle. Neal produced an old Louisville Slugger and whacked the fish on the head. It was stunned for a second, then started snapping again, although less violently.

"Sometimes you have to slam them a few more times before they quiet down," Neal explained.

Moving with great caution, he managed to loop a line around the tail. Then he fed the line into an overhanging pulley, pulled the pitch- fork out, lifted the fish and swung it over the open fish hold, still care- ful to stay clear of the jaws. When the fish was positioned over the hold, he took a filleting knife and cut the line. The fish fell into the hold where it could be heard banging against the sides.

"That was the meanest fish I've ever seen," Paul said, with a won- dering shake of his head. "It behaved more like a barracuda than a salmon."

"It looked like an Atlantic salmon, but I'm not sure what it was.

Those strange white scales. It was almost albino." Gamay shut off the camera and peered into the dimness of the fish hold. "Listen! It's far too big and aggressive to be a normal fish. It's almost as if it were some sort of mutant." She turned to Neal. "When did you first start catching these things?"

Neal took the cigar stub from between his teeth and spit over the

side. "First boats started bringing them up in the nets around six months ago. The guys called them 'devilfish.' They tore the hell out of the nets, but they were big so we cut them up and sent them off to market. Guess the meat was okay, because nobody died," he said with a smirk. "Pretty soon that's all we were catching. The smaller fish just disappeared." He gestured to the fish hold with his cigar.

"That's the reason why."

"Did you contact any fishery scientists and tell them what you were catching?"

"Oh yeah. We got in touch with the fisheries people. They didn't send anyone down."

"Why not?" "Short-staffed, they said. Guess you got to look at it their way.

You're a marine biologist. Would you move out of your lab if some- one called and said big ol' devilfish was eating your stock?"

"Yes, I would have been here in a minute." "You're different from the others. They wanted us to ship one of these babies up for them to look at."

"Why didn't you do it?" "We were going to, but after what happened to Charlie Marstons, the fishermen got scared and said to hell with it and moved on."

"Who was Charlie Marstons?" Paul said.

"Charlie was an old-timer. Fished these waters for years even after it got hard for him to get around because of a bad leg. He was a stub- born old coot, though, and liked to go out alone. They found him- or what was left of him-coupla miles east of here. From the looks of it, he caught a bunch of these lunkers, got too close and maybe his bum leg gave out. Hardly enough left to bury."

"You're saying the fish killed him?"

"No other explanation. That's when the boys started leaving. I would have gone with them if I had my boat. Funny," he said with a grin, "one of those babies is my ticket out of here."

Gamay was already thinking ahead. "I want to bring it back to the lab for analysis."

"Suits me fine," Neal said. "We'll box it up as soon as it's safe." He pointed the Tiffany back to land. By the time they pulled up to the dock, the fish was practically dead, but it managed a few spas- modic snaps, enough to warrant keeping it on board awhile longer. Neal recommended a boarding house where they could stay the night. Gamay gave him a hundred-dollar bonus, and they agreed to meet the next morning.

A pleasant middle-aged couple warmly welcomed them at the board- ing house, a Victorian structure at the edge of town. From the en- thusiasm with which they were greeted, Paul and Gamay figured that the B and B didn't get much business. The room was cheap and clean, and the couple cooked them a hearty dinner. They had a good night's sleep, and the next morning, after a huge breakfast, they set out to find Neal and reclaim their fish.

The pier was deserted. More worrisome, there was no sign of Neal or the Tiffany. They asked at the boatyard, but nobody had seen him since the day before when he'd paid for his engine work. A few men were idling around the waterfront because they had nothing better to do. No one had seen Neal that morning. The bartender they'd met the day before strolled by on his way to open up the restaurant. They asked if he had any idea where Neal might be.

"Probably nursing a hangover about now," the bartender said. "He came in last night with a hundred bucks. Used most of it up buy- ing drinks for himself and the regulars. He was pretty tanked when he left. He's done it before, so I didn't worry about him. Neal navi- gates better drunk than some men sober. He took off around eleven, and that was the last I saw of him. He's been living on his boat, even when the boatyard had it."

"Any idea why the Tiffany isn't here?" Paul asked. The bartender scanned the harbor and swore under his breath.

"Damned idiot, he was in no shape to run a boat."

"Would any of the other people who were in the bar know where he is ?"

"Naw, they were even drunker than he was. Only one not drink- ing was Fred Grogan, and he left before Mike."

Trout's analytical ear was listening for inconsistencies. "Who is Grogan?" Paul asked.

"Nobody you'd want to know," the bartender said with contempt. "Lives in the woods near the old plant. He's the only local guy the new owners kept on when they bought in. Pretty surprising, because Fred is such a shady character. He pretty much keeps to himself. Sometimes he sneaks into town, driving one of the big black SUVs you see around the plant."

The bartender paused and looked across the water, shading his eyes. A small boat had entered the harbor and was moving toward the pier at great speed. "That's Fitzy coming in. He's the lighthouse keeper. Looks like he's in a big hurry."

The outboard-powered skiff skidded up to the dock, and the white-bearded man in the boat tossed a line ashore. He was clearly excited and didn't even wait to climb out of the boat before he started to babble almost incoherently.

"Calm down, Fitzy," the bartender said. "Can't understand a word." The bearded man caught his breath and said, "I heard a big boom late last night. Rattled my windows. Figured it might be a jet flying real low. Went out this morning to take a look. Pieces of wood all over the place. Look at this." He whipped back a

tarpaulin, pulled out a jagged plank and held it over his head. The painted letters Tif were clearly visible.

The bartender's lips tightened. He went into his bar and called the police. While he waited for the law to arrive, he made several more phone calls. Pickup trucks began to arrive, and a motley fleet of search boats was organized. With Fitzy in the lead, the flotilla had already set out when the police chief arrived. The chief talked to the bartender and got his story. By then, some of the boats were returning. They had more scraps of wood that identified the boat, but no sign ofNeal.

The sheriff put in a call to the coast guard, which said it would send in a helicopter, but the consensus seemed to be that Neal had gotten drunk, decided to go for a joyride and probably hit a rock near the point and sank. The Trouts did not comment on the explanation, but as they drove back to the rooming house, their conversation dwelt on more sinister possibilities.

Gamay put it bluntly. "I think Mike was murdered." "Guess I wasn't the only one who saw the charring around the wood. I'd guess his boat was set on fire or simply blown up. Neal's bragging about the fish he caught could have got him killed."

"Is that what it is all about?" Gamay said, her eyes flashing with anger. "Neal was killed over a fish?"

"Maybe." She shook her head "Poor guy. I can't help thinking that we're somehow responsible-"

"The only ones responsible are the guys who killed him."

"And I'm betting that Oceanus had a big hand in this." "If you're right, they may come after us next." "Then I'd suggest that we pack our gear and get out of town." Paul pulled the rental car in front of the guest house, and they went inside, paid their bill and grabbed their bags. The owners were obviously sorry to see them go, and followed them out to the car. As they chattered on about how it was a shame that they were leaving, Gamay tugged Paul's sleeve and steered him to the driver's side. She got in and waved farewell.

"Sorry to spoil our send-off party. While we were talking, I saw a black Tahoe pass by."

"Looks like the wolves are gathering," Paul said. He turned onto the road that would take them out of town and glanced in the mir- ror. "No one on our tail."

Except for a few vehicles, they saw little traffic, and once they had

gone beyond the town's outskirts, the road was empty. The two-lane road wound through thick pine woods, gradually ascending so they were driving high above the sea. On one side of the road was forest, and on the other a sheer drop-off for hundreds of feet.

They were about two miles from the village when Gamay turned to look at the road behind them and said, "Uh-oh."

Paul glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a black Tahoe bear- ing down on them. "They must have been waiting down a side road for us to pass."

Gamay tightened her seat belt. "Okay, then, show them what you can do."

Paul gave her an incredulous look. "You realize we are driving a six-cylinder family sedan that is probably half the size and weight of that black behemoth behind us."

"Damnit, Paul, don't be so analytical. You're a crazy Massachusetts driver. Just put the pedal to the metal."

Trout rolled his eyes. "Yes ma'am," he said.

He punched the gas pedal with his foot. The car accelerated to a respectable eighty miles per hour. Easily matching their speed, the Tahoe continued to gain. Paul managed to wring another ten miles per hour out of the engine, but the SUV moved closer.

The road began to go into a series of curves that matched the con- tour of the coastal hills. The rental vehicle was no sports car, but it held the road better on the turns than the big SUV, which leaned heavily as the curves became sharper. Trout had to hit the brakes to keep from going off the road, but the SUV was even less maneuver- able.

Slowed by the serpentine curves, the SUV lost ground. Trout curbed his elation. He kept his eyes glued to the road, hands firmly gripping the steering wheel, pushing his car to just under the speed at which it could go out of control and overshoot a curve. He knew that one lapse-a patch of sandy highway, an errant boulder or an error of judgment-could get them both killed in a fiery crash.

Gamay kept tabs on their pursuer and maintained a running com- mentary. The car's wheels squealed with each change in direction. Trout held it steady. He was running between sixty and seventy miles per hour, and was heading down a long, gradual slope in the road, when an unbelievable sight met his eyes.

Ahead of them, a black Tahoe had pulled out onto the road from behind a huge boulder. For a second, he thought the SUV behind him had used a shortcut.

Then Gamay shouted, "There are two SUVs. They're trying to sandwich us in."

The vehicle in front of the Trouts' car slowed to block the road, and the other SUV quickly caught up from behind. Trout tried to go around, but each time he poked the rental car's nose into the on- coming lane, the SUV pulled in front of him. He touched the brakes to avoid a rear-end collision. The following SUV crashed into his rear bumper, crushing it into the trunk and sending the car into a neck- jolting wild fishtail.

Paul fought the wheel and managed to keep the car from going into a spin. The Tahoe slammed into the car again. The smell of gas from a ruptured tank filled the car. The Tahoe made another lunge, but this time Gamay saw it coming and yelled, "Right!"

Trout spun the wheel to the right and the Tahoe only clipped the bumper. Gamay glanced at the SUVs, which had pulled away.

"They're holding back for some reason."

"That won't last," Paul said. "Then we'd better do something soon. The rental agency is going

to wonder why their car is only two feet long. Damn, he's coming in again. Left!"

Trout jerked the wheel. The car moved into the passing lane, and

Trout saw something that made his hair stand up on edge. The road curved sharply to the right. The Tahoes could keep them boxed in until the last minute. The SUV in front would screen the curve from view. Then it would slow to make the turn, and the one behind would knock them off the cliff like a cue stick tapping a billiard ball.

Paul yelled at Gamay to hold tight, and he gripped the wheel even tighter with his sweaty palms. He tried to remove all thought from his mind, relying only on instinct, keeping sharp watch in the rearview mirror. Timing would be crucial.

The vehicle on their tail began to accelerate. Trout made his move. When the SUV came within a few feet of the car's bumper, he jerked the wheel to the right.

The car hit the soft, sandy berm along the side of the road and drove up on the inclined shoulder like a race car on the angled track of a speedway. It crashed through bushes and small trees. Wood shrieked against metal.

He saw a flash of black as the Tahoe flew by him on the left. Then came a horrendous screech of brakes and a crash. The SUV that had been on his tail had slammed into the rear of the vehicle in front, locking bumpers. The lead vehicle tried to slow and turn, but the weight of the attached SUV made any turn impossible, and they were locked together. Both vehicles shot off the cliff like projectiles from a slingshot and plunged hundreds of feet in a fiery tandem death trap.

Trout was having his own problems. The banking had followed the contour of the road, and now it curved while the car maintained a straight trajectory. He lost all control as the car was airborne. Cen- trifugal force kept him pressed into the driver's door. The car landed at an angle, collapsing the wheels, with a sound like a junkyard sym- phony. He tried to glance over at Gamay, but the airbags deployed and all he could see was exploding white plastic.

Then only blackness.

16

WELCOME BACK TO Torshavn, Mr. Austin," said the friendly desk clerk at the Hotel Hania. "Your fishing trip up the coast went well, I trust."

"Yes, thanks. I ran into some very unusual fish." The efficient desk clerk handed Austin an envelope along with his room key. "This came in earlier today."

Austin opened the envelope and read the message neatly printed on hotel letterhead: I'm in Copenhagen. Staying at the Palace. Dinner offer still good? Therri.

Austin smiled as he thought of Them's incredible eyes and her dulcet voice. He must remember to play the lottery. Maybe the winds of good fortune were blowing in his direction. On a clean sheet of sta- tionery, he wrote a reply: Tonight at the Tivoli? He folded the paper, gave it to the desk clerk and asked him to send the message.

"Would you try to reserve a room for tonight at the Palace Hotel?" he said.

"I'd be happy to, Mr. Austin. I'll ready your bill for checkout."

Austin went up to his room, where he took a shower and shaved. The phone rang as he was toweling himself dry. The desk clerk said that his room at the Palace was all set and that he had taken the lib- erty of canceling the previous reservation at an airport hotel. Austin packed his bag and called Professor Jorgensen. The professor was in class, so Austin left a message saying he would like to see him later in the day if possible. He said he would be en route to Copenhagen and suggested that Jorgensen leave a reply at the Palace Hotel front desk.

Austin gave the desk clerk a generous tip, then he caught the hel- icopter shuttle from Torshavn to Vagar Airport and took the At- lantic Airways flight to Copenhagen. Later that day, the airport taxi dropped him off at Radhuspladen, the city's main square. He made his way past the statue of Hans Christian Andersen and the spout- ing dragon water fountains to the stately old Palace Hotel overlook- ing the busy square. Two messages waited for him. One was from Therri: Tivoli it is! See you at six. The other note was from Professor Jorgensen, saying he would be in his office all afternoon.

Austin dropped his duffel bag off in his room and called the pro- fessor to tell him he was on his way. As Austin was leaving the hotel, it occurred to him that jeans and turtleneck were hardly appropri- ate for a night out with a beautiful woman. He stopped at a men's clothing shop in the concourse and, with the help of a knowledgeable salesman, quickly picked out what he wanted. A hefty bribe to the salesman and tailor insured that the clothes would be ready for him at five.

The University of Copenhagen campus was a short cab ride from the central square. The Marine Biological Laboratory was part of the Zoological Institute. Park lawns surrounded the two-story brick building. The professor's cubicle had exactly enough room to ac- commodate a desk and computer and two chairs and a clutter limit that the professor had far exceeded. Graphs and charts covered the walls, and folders were piled everywhere.

"Pardon the mess," he apologized. "My main office is at the Helsingor campus. I use this closet when I'm teaching classes here." He removed a pile of papers from a chair to make room for Austin. Nonplussed at what to do with the mess, he placed it precariously atop a teetering stack of other papers on his desk.

"Wonderful to see you again, Kurt," he said with his big-toothed grin. "I'm so glad you were able to make it to our beautiful city."

"It's always a pleasure to visit Copenhagen. Unfortunately, my flight back to the States leaves tomorrow, so I only have one night here."

"Better than nothing at all," Jorgensen said, settling into the cramped area behind his desk. "Tell me, did you ever hear anything further from that lovely woman, the attorney who was having cof- fee with you in Torshavn?"

"Therri Weld? As a matter of fact, I'm having dinner with her tonight."

"Lucky man! I'm sure she'll be a more enjoyable companion than

I was," Jorgensen said with a chuckle. "Well, did you enjoy Skaal- shavn?"

Enjoy isn't the word for it. Skaalshavn is a surprising place.

Thanks for letting me use your cottage and your boat." "My pleasure. It's incredible country, isn't it?" Austin nodded. "Speaking of Skaalshavn, I was wondering how your lab tests turned out."

The professor rummaged through the Mt. Everest of papers on his desk. Miraculously, he found the file he was looking for. He took his glasses off and replaced them. "I don't know if you're acquainted with my main areas of expertise. I specialize in the effects ofhypoxia. I study how oxygen deficiency and temperature change affect fish populations. I don't claim to be an expert in every area, so I've run my findings by various colleagues in bacterial viruses. We have tested dozens of water samples and fish taken at various locations near the

Oceanus operation for signs of anomalies. We wondered if there was a parasite. Nothing."

"What about your original theory that there might be trace chem- icals in the water?"

"No, to the contrary. The Oceanus people weren't exaggerating when they bragged their filtration system was state-of-the-art. The water is absolutely pure. The other fish farms I tested produced waste from feed and so on. In short, I found nothing that would affect the Skaalshavn stocks."

"Which begs the question, what is decimating the fish popula- tion?"

Jorgensen pushed his glasses up on his forehead. "There could be other reasons we haven't touched. Predators, habitat degradation, a disruption of the food supply."

"Have you ruled out a link to the fish farm completely?"

"No, I haven't, which is why I'm returning to Skaalshavn to make more tests."

"That might be a problem," Austin said in an understatement. He proceeded to give the professor a condensed version of his ex- ploration of the fish farm, his narrow escape and rescue. "I'll be glad to pay you for the loss of the boat," he added.

"The boat is the least of my concerns. You could have been filled" Jorgensen was flabbergasted. "I ran into patrol boats when I was making my tests. They looked intimidating, but they never attacked or threatened me."

"Maybe they didn't like my face. I fnow I didn't like theirs." "You may have noticed I am not exactly a movie star," the profes- sor said. "No one tried to kill me."

"It's possible that they knew your tests would come up negative.

In that case, there was no reason to scare you off. Did you discuss your work with Gunnar?"

"Yes, he was always there when I returned from my field tests and seemed very interested in what I was doing." A light dawned in the professor's eyes. "I see! You think he was an informant for Oceanus?"

"I don't know for certain, but I was told that he worked for

Oceanus during the construction of the fish farm. It's certainly pos- sible that he continued to be employed by the company after the plant was built."

Jorgensen frowned. "Have you mentioned this episode to the police?"

"Not just yet. Technically speaking, I was trespassing on private property."

"But you don't try to /fill somebody simply for being nosy!" "That does seem like an overreaction. However, I can't see the Faroe police department pushing the matter. Oceanus would deny that our little dust-off ever took place. The way they reacted to a lit- tle harmless snooping tells me they must have something to hide. I'd like to poke around quietly, and the police would simply stir things up."

"As you wish. I know little about intrigue. My realm is science." His brow wrinkled in thought. "That creature in the tank that scared the devil out of you. You don't think it was a shark?"

"All I know is that it was big and hungry and as pale as a ghost." "A ghost fish. Interesting. I'll have to think about it. In the mean- time, I'll prepare for my return trip to the Faroes."

"Are you sure you want to go? It might be dangerous after my en- counter.

"This time, I'm going in a research vessel. Besides safety in num- bers, it will provide access to a full range of research gear. I'd love to bring along an archaeologist to research those caves."

"Not a great idea, Professor, but there's someone in town who might be helpful in that area. Her father visited the caves, and she told me how to gain entry. Her name is Pia."

"The minister's widow?"

"Yes, you've met her? She's quite a woman."

"I'll say," Jorgensen said, before catching himself. The blush stain- ing his cheeks told the whole story. "We've met a few times around the village. She's impossible to avoid. Can you change your plans and return to Skaalshavn with me?"

Austin shook his head. "Thanks for the offer. But I've got to get back to my duties at NUMA. I'm leaving Joe to wrap up the tests on the Sea Lamprey. Please keep me apprised of your findings."

"I will, of course." Jorgensen cradled his chin in his hand, and a faraway look

came to his eyes.

"My scientific training abhors the whole idea of portents. I am trained to draw no conclusion unless I have the facts to back it up. There's something terribly wrong here, Kurt. I can feel it in my bones. Something unholy"

"If it's any consolation, I've had the same feeling. It goes beyond a bunch of guys running around with guns." He leaned forward with a level gaze in his blue-green eyes. "I'd like you to promise me some- thing when you go back to Skaalshavn."

"Of course, my boy. Anything you say."

"Take care, Professor," Austin said, in a firm manner that left no room for misunderstanding. "Tsike great care."

17

THE SENSE OF foreboding continued to haunt Austin even after he stepped outside Jorgensen's office building into the bright Danish sunlight. Several times during the cab ride back to the hotel, he found himself glancing through the rear window. He gave up finally and sat back to enjoy the ride. If danger were stalk-ing him, he would never see it with all the traffic.

Austin stopped at the clothing store to pick up his purchases. He carried the neatly tied boxes to his room and called Therri. It was 5:30. "I have a room one floor below yours. I think I can hear you singing in joyful anticipation of our dinner."

"Then you must have also heard me dancing as well." "It's amazing how my charm affects women," Austin said. "I'll meet you in the lobby. We could make believe that we're old lovers encountering each other by chance."

"You're a surprising romantic, Mr. Austin."

"I've been called worse things. You'll know me by the red carna- tion in my lapel."

When the elevator doors opened, Therri stepped out as if she were on stage and immediately caught the attention of every male in the vicinity, including Austin.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she glided across the lobby. Therri's chestnut hair tumbled down to the thin straps other white ankle-length lace dress that clung to her slim waist and thighs.

Her warm smile showed that Therri approved other date as well. She surveyed the European-styled single-breasted jacket of dove gray whose slightly pinched waist emphasized Austin's shoulders like a military uniform. The blue shirt and white silk tie set off his deep tan, coral-colored eyes and pale hair. Pinned to his lapel was a red carna- tion.

She extended her hand, which Austin kissed lightly. "What a lovely surprise," she said in an upper-class British accent. "I haven't seen you since-"

"Biarritz. Or was it Casablanca?"

Therri put her wrist to her forehead. "Oh, who can say? One place blends with the other over time, don't you agree?"

Austin leaned close to her ear and whispered, "We'll always have Marrakech."

Then he hooked her arm in his, and they strolled out the door as if they had known each other for ages. They walked across the busy square toward Tivoli, the famed nineteenth-century amusement park known for its rides and entertainment. The lively park was ablaze with neon and filled with visitors taking in the theater, dance and symphony music. They stopped to watch a folk-dance troupe for a few minutes. Therri suggested that they have dinner at a restaurant with an outdoor terrace, and they were seated at a table that had a view of the Ferris wheel.

Austin picked up the menu. "Since you chose the restaurant, I'll make the dinner selections, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. I've been subsisting onsmorrebrod sandwiches." When the waiter came over, Austin ordered tiny fjord shrimps as an appetizer. For the main course, he ordered flaelesteg, roast pork served with crackling and cabbage, for himself, and morbradbof, small pork fillets in mushroom sauce, for Therri. Then for drinks, he picked Carlsberg pilsner beer rather than wine.

"You placed that order rather deftly," Therri said admiringly. "I cheated. I came to this same restaurant the last time I was in

Copenhagen on a NUMA assignment."

"Great minds, as they say." They toasted each other with their foamy glasses and sipped the cool, crisp beer. The shrimp came. Therri closed her eyes with pleasure after the first bite. "This is wonderful."

"The secret of cooking fish is to never let the flavoring drown out the subtle taste. This is flavored with lime and spiced with fresh pepper."

"One more thing to add to my thank-you list."

"Your good mood seems to go beyond the food. Your meeting with Becker went well, I take it."

"Your friend Mr. Becker was actually quite charming. He can't speak highly enough of you and was very impressed with the photos you took of the Sea Sentinel. At my urging, they checked out the Sen- tinel for themselves and found it had been sabotaged exactly as you described. We came to terms. They agreed to drop the charges against Marcus."

"Congratulations. No strings attached?"

"A whole ball of twine. Marcus and anyone associated with SOS, including yours truly, must be out of Denmark within the next forty- eight hours. We're booked to fly home on the Concorde tomorrow."

"The Concorde? SOS doesn't stint when it comes to travel, does it?" She shrugged. "The people who contribute millions to SOS don't seem to mind it, as long as the oceans are protected."

"I'll try that line with the NUMA bean counters who keep an eye on the travel budget. You'll be having lunch at Kinkaid's while I'm dining on rubber chicken at thirty-five thousand feet. Tell me, what other conditions did Becker impose?"

"No press conferences allowed on Danish soil. There can be no at- tempts to salvage the Sea Sentinel. And the only way we will ever step foot in Denmark is if we smuggle ourselves in as guest workers. Again, I can't thank you enough for all you've done."

"Everything comes with a price. Tell me all you know about Oceanus."

"Of course, I'll be glad to. As I said last time, Oceanus is a multi- national corporation dealing in fish products and transport. It oper- ates fleets of fishing boats and transport vessels around the world."

"That could describe a dozen corporations." Austin smiled. "Why do I have the feeling you're hiding something?"

Therri looked shocked. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who's used to dealing with people who think that telling some of the truth gets them off the hook for all of it."

She frowned and said, "I deserved that. It's an old lawyer habit. We attorneys like to keep something in reserve. SOS is very much in your debt. What would you like to know?"

"Who owns the company, for starters?"

"SOS asked itself the same question. We ran into a thicket of in- tertwining shadow corporations, paper companies and murky trusts. One name kept coming up: Toonook."

"Huh. That name reminds me of a film I saw when I was a kid, an old documentary called Nanoo/ of the North. Is he an Eskimo?" "That's my guess. We can't confirm it, but we dug up some cir- cumstantial evidence pointing in that direction. It took an incredible amount of research. We learned that he's a Canadian citizen, and that he's very good at keeping his face hidden. That's all I can tell you about him, and that's the whole truth."

Austin nodded, thinking about the swarthy dark-skinned guards who'd shot at him. "Let's go back to Oceanus. What first brought them to the attention of SOS?"

"They were one of the few companies that ignored our Faroes

boycott. We'd been aware offish-farming as an environmental issue, but it was the company's attempts to hide its operations that got Mar- cus interested. When he learned about the fish farm in the Faroes, he thought that he might stir things

up if he focused the spotlight on the operation."

"There are two ships on the bottom of the ocean that prove he was right.

"Let me ask you something," Therri said, leveling her gaze. "What do you know about Oceanus that you haven't told me?"

"Fair enough. While you were negotiating with Mr. Becker, I poked into an Oceanus fish farm in the Faroes."

"Did you learn anything?"

Austin felt a twinge of pain in his chest wound. "I learned that they don't like people poking into their business. I'd advise you and your friends to give them a wide berth."

"Now who's the evasive one?"

Austin only smiled. As much as he wanted to trust Therri, he did not know the extent of her loyalty to SOS and its leader. "I've told you enough to keep you out of trouble."

"You must know that throwing me a tidbit of information is only going to stir up my curiosity."

"Just remember that curiosity killed the cat. I wouldn't want to see you suffer a similar fate."

"Thanks for the warning." She smiled her beguiling smile.

"You're welcome. Maybe we can continue this conversation when we get back to Washington."

"I can think of any number of hotel lobbies that would be conducive to an accidental rendezvous. We can pledge not to talk business."

"Let's begin now." Austin signaled the waiter and ordered two Peter Heering cherry liqueurs.

"What would you like to talk about, then?" Therri said. "Tell me about SOS."

"That could be construed as business."

"Okay, I'll ask you a personal question. How did you come to be involved with the Sentinels?"

"Fate," she said with a smile. "Before I became a whale-hugger, I was a tree-hugger. My future was ordained from the moment of birth. My folks named me Thoreau after Henry David."

"I wondered where the Therri came from."

"I suppose I was lucky they didn't name me Henry. My father was an environmental activist before there was such a thing. My mother was from an old Yankee family that got rich on slaves and rum. When I graduated from Harvard Law School, it was expected that

I go into the family guilt business. My turn now. How did you get Into NUMA?"

Austin gave Therri the Cliffs Notes version of his career.

"There's an unaccountable gap in time in your life history," she said.

"You're much too alert. I worked for the CIA during that period.

My division was disbanded after the Cold War ended. Can't tell you more than that."

"That's all right," she said. "An air of mystery adds to your at- tractiveness."

Austin felt like an outfielder about to catch an easy pop fly. Therri had moved the conversation to a slightly more intimate level, and he was about to respond in kind when he noticed her looking over his shoulder. He turned and saw Marcus Ryan making his way toward their table.

"Therri!" Ryan said, with his matinee-idol smile. "What a nice surprise."

"Hello, Marcus. You remember Kurt Austin from the hearing in Torshavn."

"Of course! Mr. Austin gave the only unbiased testimony during that whole fiasco."

"Why don't you join us?" Therri said. "You don't mind, do you, Kurt?"

Austin minded very much. The encounter smelled strongly of a staged meeting, but he was curious about the reason for the setup. He motioned to a chair and shook hands with Ryan. The grip was sur- prisingly firm.

"Only for a minute," Ryan said. "I don't want to intrude on your dinner, but I'm glad for the opportunity to thank Mr. Austin for helping SOS."

"Your appreciation is misdirected. I didn't do it to help SOS. It was a personal favor for Miss Weld. She's the one who persuaded me to take a close look at your boat."

"I don't know of many people who can resist her persuasiveness, and she deserves a lot of credit. Nevertheless, you did a great service for the creatures of the sea."

"Spare me the hearts and flowers, Mr. Ryan. I gave Therri the ev- idence of sabotage because it was the right thing to do, not because I believe in your cause."

"Then you know I had no responsibility for that collision." "I know that you purposely ratcheted up the tension, hoping some- thing would happen so you could get it on the TV cameras."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. From what I know about NUMA, your organization isn't above using unorthodox methods to achieve its goals."

"There's a big difference. Every one of us, right up to Admiral Sandecker, is ready to bear responsibility for our actions. We don't take refuge behind posters of puppy-faced little harp seals."

Ryan's face turned the color of a cooked beet. "I've always been willing to take the consequences for my actions."

"Sure, as long as you knew there was a way out."

Ryan smiled over his anger. "You're a difficult man, Mr. Austin."

"I try to be."

The waiter arrived just then with their dinners.

"Well, I won't spoil your evening," Ryan said. "It was fun talking to you, Mr. Austin. I'll give you a call later, Them."

With a jaunty wave, he joined the throngs moving past the restau- rant.

Austin watched Ryan depart and said, "Your friend takes an ex- alted view of himself. I thought the oceans already had a god. Nep- tune or Poseidon, depending on your language of choice."

He expected Therri to defend Ryan, but she laughed instead. "Congratulations, Kurt. It's nice to know that Marcus isn't the only one who has a talent for irritating people."

"It comes naturally to me. You should tell him that the next time you set up an accidental meeting."

She glanced at the Ferris wheel, avoiding his steady gaze, then toyed with her fork before answering. "Was it that transparent?"

"Any more transparent and it would be invisible."

She sighed heavily. "Sorry for the clumsy attempt to deceive you. You didn't deserve it. Marcus wanted to meet you so he could thank you. He was sincere about that. I didn't expect you to get into a spit- ting match. Please accept my apology."

"Only if you'll have a nightcap in the Palace lounge after we take a long walk around the neighborhood." "You drive a hard bargain." Austin gave her a devilish grin. "As your friend Mr. Ryan said, I'm a difficult man."

18

COPENHAGEN SEEMED TO be in the midst of a major cel- ebration, but the bash was only a normal night in one of Eu- rope's liveliest cities. Music issued from dozens of cafes. The parks and squares along an expansive pedestrian mall named Stroget teemed with strollers and street performers. The party atmosphere

was fun, but it was hard to carry on a conversation. Austin suggested that they turn down a quiet street lined with closed boutiques and make their way back to the hotel.

The deserted street was dark except for a few shop windows and softly glowing gas lamps. Austin was listening to Therri tell an an- ecdote about Becker, when he noticed movement ahead and saw two figures step out of the shadows into a puddle of yellow light.

Austin knew the Danes to be low-key and extra polite, and Copen- hagen was relatively crime-free. It didn't bother him when the two men took up a stance blocking the sidewalk. Maybe they'd had too much Akavit. He took Therri s arm and prepared to walk around the pair. He reassessed the situation when the men produced long clubs from behind their backs.

Hearing a scraping footfall, Austin glanced over his shoulder. Two more men, also wielding clubs, were approaching from behind. Therri had become aware of the threat without comprehending it and had stopped talking. In what looked like a rehearsed strategy, the men began to encircle them.

Austin looked around for a weapon. Figuring that anything was better than nothing, he grabbed the lid from a row of trash cans. The heavy-duty cover was made of thick, solid aluminum, he was glad to see. He stepped protectively in front of Therri and used the lid like a medieval infantryman's shield to fend off a clanging blow from the nearest attacker. The man brought the club up to strike again, but Austin went from defense to offense and straight-armed the heavy lid into the attacker's face. The man yelped with pain, and his knees buckled. Austin lifted the lid in both hands and brought it down on the man's head, where it made a sound like a gong. His hands hurt at the shock of the impact, but the attacker was even worse off, crum- pling onto the sidewalk in a dark heap.

Another attacker swiftly closed in. Austin jammed the lid in his face, but the attacker anticipated the move, stepping back out of range and clubbing the lid harmlessly aside. Austin was trying to keep the tender left side of his rib from being hit. The assailant sensed a weakness and landed a glancing blow to Austin's head. Austin saw whirling galaxies. At the same time, he heard Therri's scream. One attacker held her while the other pulled her back by the hair to expose her throat. A hard blow to her windpipe could be fatal.

Austin blinked the stars from his eyes and tried to go to her aid. His assailant stepped in front of him and brought his club down as if he were wielding a two-handed broadsword. Austin deflected the blow, but it knocked the lid from his hand, and he lost his balance. Down on one knee, Austin raised his arm to protect his head. He saw wide faces and glittering eyes, clubs raised in the air, and braced him- self for a shower of blows to rain down on his skull. Instead, he heard thuds and grunts and men yelling in two different languages, one in-comprehensible, the other Spanish. The attackers who had encircled him melted away like snowflakes.

He struggled to his feet and saw figures running away from him. Clubs rattled to the pavement. Shadows were moving in every direc- tion, and he was reminded of the scene in the movie Ghost where the shades of the dead take the damned to the underworld. Then the shad- ows disappeared. He and Therri were alone, except for the slumped form of the man he had clouted. The attacker's friends had apparently abandoned him.

'Are you all right?" Austin said, taking Them's arm.

'Yes, I'm fine, but as you can tell, I'm very shaky. What about you:-

He lightly touched the side of his head. "My head feels like raw hamburger and my skull is full of twittering sparrows, but other than that I'm fine. It could have been worse."

"I lnow she said with a shudder. "Thank goodness those men saved us."

"What men? I was a little busy with my imitation oflvanhoe." "They came out of nowhere. I think there were two of them. They went after the others and chased them away."

Austin kicked the battered trash-can lid. "Hell, I thought I scared them off with my head-masher." He brushed the dirt off his ripped and dirty pants. "Damn, this is the first new suit I've bought in years."

Therri couldn't help laughing. "Incredible. You narrowly missed being beaten to death, and you're worried about your suit." She em- braced him in a warm hug.

Therri was holding him tightly. He didn't even complain about the pressure of her body against his knife wound. He was thinking that she smelled very good,

when suddenly she stiffened, backed away from him and looked over his shoulder with horror in her eyes.

"Kurt, watch out!"

Austin turned and saw that the attacker who'd been lying on the sidewalk was slowly getting to his feet. The man stared at them for a few seconds, apparently still dazed. Austin clenched his fists and started toward the man, ready to send him back to la-la land. He stopped in midstep when a small circle of intense red appeared in the man's forehead.

"Get down!" Austin yelled at Therri. When she hesitated, he pulled her to the sidewalk, shielding her body with his.

The man started toward them, then he stopped as if he had walked into an invisible wall, went down on his knees and fell face down onto the sidewalk. Austin heard footsteps and saw a figure running down the street. Austin pulled Therri to her feet and apologized for knocking her down.

"What happened?" She seemed to be in a daze.

"Someone shot our friend. I saw the spot from a laser sight."

"Why would they do that?"

"Maybe his company has a strict severance policy."

"Or maybe they didn't want him talking," she said, staring at the dead body.

"Either way, this isn't a healthy place to be."

Austin took Therri by the arm and guided her away from the scene. He kept a sharp eye out for a return of their attackers, not re- laxing until the lights of the Palace Hotel were in sight. The hotel cocktail lounge seemed like another world. Austin and Therri sat in a corner booth surrounded by the cheerful Babel of voices and the tinkling of a jazz piano playing Cole Porter. Austin had ordered two double scotches.

Therri took a deep swallow other drink and looked around at the other patrons. "Did that really happen out there in the street?"

"It wasn't a production of West Side Story, if that's what you mean. Can you tell me what you remember?"

"It all happened so fast. Two of those men with the clubs grabbed me." She frowned. "Loo what those SOBs did to my hair." Anger was replacing her fear. "Who were those jerks?"

"The attack was well-coordinated. They knew we were in Copen- hagen and must have been watching us tonight in order to set up the ambush. What's your guess?"

She replied without hesitation. "Oceanus?"

Austin nodded grimly. "As I learned in the Faroes, Oceanus has the thug power, the violent inclination and the organization. What happened next?"

"They let me go. Just like that. Then they were running away, with the other men chasing after them." She shook her head. "I wish our Good Samaritans had stayed so I could thank them. Should we tell the police what happened?"

"Normally, I'd say yes. But I don't know if it would do any good. They might pass it off as an attempted mugging. Given your rela- tionship with the Danish authorities, you might be detained here longer than you'd like."

"You're right," Therri said. She drained the last other glass. "I'd better get back to my room. My flight leaves early in the morning."

Austin walked Therri to her door, where they paused. "You're sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for the interesting evening. You certainly

know how to show a girl a good time."

"That was nothing. Just wait until our next date." She smiled and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I can hardly wait." He was impressed at how quickly Therri had recovered. She was proving to be an iron butterfly. "Call me if you need anything."

She nodded. Austin wished her a good night's sleep and headed for the elevator. She watched until the elevator doors had closed. Then she pulled her key out of the lock, walked down the hall and knocked on another door, which was opened by Marcus Ryan. His smile disappeared when he saw the strain in her face. "Are you all right?" he said with concern in his voice. "You look a little pale."

"Nothing a little makeup won't cure." She brushed by him and stretched out on the sofa. "Whip me up a strong cup of tea, then have a seat and I'll tell you all about it."

They sat down, and she told them about their attack and rescue.

After hearing her story, Ryan tented his fingers and stared off into space. "Austin is right. It's Oceanus. Vmsure of it." "Me too. I'm less sure who our rescuers were." "Austin didn't know who they were?" She shook her head. "He said no."

"Was he telling the truth?" "He may suspect who they were, but I didn't press him on that.

Kurt doesn't strike me as someone who lies."

"Well, well, my tough-minded legal counsel has a soft side after

all. You like him, don't you?" Ryan said with a foxy grin.

"I won't deny it. He's-different."

"I'm different, too, you must admit."

"That you are," she said with a smile. "That's why we're profes- sional colleagues and not lovers."

Ryan sighed theatrically. "Guess I'm fated to be a bridesmaid, never a bride."

"You'd make a hideous bride. Besides, you had your chance to be a bride. As you recall, I didn't like playing second fiddle to SOS."

"Didn't blame you. I am something of a warrior monk when it comes to the Sentinels."

"Crap! Don't give me that monk stuff. I happen to know you've got a girlfriend in every port."

"Hell, Therri, even a monk has to get out of the monastery and kick up his heels from time to time. But let's talk about your in- triguing relationship with Austin. Do you think he's smitten by your charms, enough to have him wrapped around your finger?"

"From what I've seen, Kurt doesn't wrap around anyone s finger." Her eyes narrowed. "What's going on in that tangle of plots and schemes that you call a mind?"

"Just a thought. I'd like to get NUMA on our side. We need mus- cle if we're going to tackle Oceanus."

"And if we can't get NUMA to help us?"

He shrugged. "Then we'll have to go it alone."

Therri shook her head. "We're not big enough to do that. This is not a street gang we're dealing with. They're too big and powerful. You saw how easily they sabotaged our ship. If someone like Kurt Austin is nervous, then we should pay attention. We can't risk any more lives."

"Don't underestimate SOS, Therri. Muscle isn't everything. Strength can come from knowledge."

"Don't talk in riddles, Marcus."

He smiled. "We may have a winning card. Josh Green called yes- terday. He has stumbled onto something big, and it concerns an Oceanus operation in Canada."

"What sort of operation?"

"Josh wasn't sure. It came out of Ben Nighthawk."

"The college intern in our office?" Ryan nodded. "As you know, Nighthawk is a Canadian Indian.

He's been getting these weird letters from his family in the North Woods. A

corporation took over a big tract of land near their village. As a favor to Ben, Josh looked into the ownership. The land was purchased by a straw corporation set up by Oceanus."

In her excitement, Therri put aside her fears. "This may be the lead we're looking for."

"Uh-huh. I thought the same thing. Which is why I told Josh to check it out."

"You sent him up there alone?"

"He was on his way to Canada to meet Ben when he called. Night- hawk knows the lay of the land. Don't worry. They'll be careful."

Therri bit her lower lip as she thought back to the savage attack on a quiet Copenhagen street. She respected Ryan for a hundred dif- ferent reasons, but sometimes his zeal to attain a goal got in the way of his judgment.

Fear clouded her eyes. "I hope so," she murmured.

19

THE GIANT TREE trunks soared like columns in an ancient temple. Their intertwining branches blocked the sun's rays and created an artificial twilight on the forest floor. Far below the tree- tops, the dented old pickup lurched and dipped like a boat in a storm as it climbed over ropy tree roots and unyielding rocks.

Joshua Green sat on the passenger side, jouncing on the hard seat. He kept one hand above his head to cushion the impact of his skull against the interior of the truck's roof. Green was an environmental law expert with the Sentinels of the Sea. He was a sandy-haired, thin-faced man whose large, round glasses and birdlike nose made him look like an emaciated owl. He had gamely toughed out the ride without a complaint until the truck hit a bump that practically bounced him through the overhead.

"I'm feeling like a kernel in a popcorn machine," he said to the driver. "How much longer do I have to endure this torture?"

"About five minutes; then we'll start walking," Ben Nighthawk replied. "Don't

blame you for getting sick of the bumpy ride. Sorry about the transportation, too. It's the best my cousin could come up with."

Green nodded in resignation and turned his attention back to the deep woods that encroached on every side. Before being assigned to SOS headquarters, he'd been part of the field operations SWAT team. He had been rammed and shot at, and he'd spent short but un- forgettable times in jails no better than medieval dungeons. He had acquired a reputation for amazing aplomb under fire, and his pro- fessorial appearance disguised a tough interior. But the unnatural darkness of his surroundings unnerved Green more than anything or anybody he had ever encountered at sea.

"The road doesn't bother me. It's these damned woodsy he said, staring out at the forest. "Damned creepy! It's the middle of the day, the sun is shining, and it's dark as Hades out there. Like something out of a Tolkien novel. Wouldn't surprise me if an Ore or an ogre

jumped out at us. Whoops, I think I just saw Shrek."

Nighthawk laughed. "I suppose the woods are a little spooky if you're not used to them." He gazed through the windshield, but in- stead of apprehension, a look of reverence bathed his round, apple- brown features. "It's different when you grow up around here. The forest and the darkness are your friends because they provide pro- tection." He paused and said wistfully, "Most of the time."

A few minutes later, Nighthawk brought the truck to a halt, and they got out and stood in the cathedral gloom. Clouds of tiny flies whirled around their heads. The powerful scent of pine was almost suffocating, but to Nighthawk it was like the finest perfume. He ab- sorbed the sights and smells with a beatific expression on his face, then he and Green donned the backpacks that carried cameras and film, survival tools, water and snacks.

Without consulting a compass, Nighthawk started walking. "This way/' he said, as confident as if he were following a dotted line on the ground.

They moved in silence across the thick carpet made up of decades of fallen pine needles, weaving their way through the tree trunks. The air was hot and oppressive, and sweat soaked their shirts within minutes. Except for clusters of ferns and moss hills, no underbrush grew beneath the trees. They made good time without bushes and briars to slow them down. As he loped after Nighthawk,

Green re- flected on the path that had led him from the comfort of his air-conditioned office to this murky weald.

In addition to his duties with SOS, Green taught part-time at Georgetown University in Washington, which was where he'd met Ben Nighthawk, who was attending his class. The young Indian was in college on scholarship. He wanted to use his education to save the North Woods environment, which was threatened by development. Struck by Ben's intelligence and enthusiasm, Green had asked him to be a research assistant in the SOS office.

The lanky environmentalist and the stocky young Indian were only a few years apart in age, and they had soon become good friends as well as colleagues. Nighthawk was glad for the friendship because he infrequently made it home. His family lived on the shores of a big lake in a remote and almost inaccessible part of eastern Canada. A seaplane owned jointly by the villagers made weekly trips to the near- est town for supplies and emergencies and also carried mail back and forth.

His mother had been keeping Nighthawk up to date about a major construction project on the lake. Someone was probably build- ing a trophy lodge, Nighthawk had assumed with resignation. It was the sort of project he was determined to wage war against when he got out of college. Then, the week before, his mother had written an upsetting letter hinting at dark goings-on, and asking her son to come home as soon as he could.

Green told Nighthawk to take as much time off as he needed. A few days after Nighthawk had left for Canada, he called the SOS of- fice. He sounded desperate. "I need your help," he implored.

"Of course," Green replied, thinking his young friend had run out of money. "How much do you need?"

"I don't need any money. I'm worried about my familyV9 Nighthawk explained that he had gone to the town nearest to the village and learned that the seaplane hadn't come in for two weeks. The townspeople assumed that the plane had mechanical problems and that someone would eventually come out of the woods by land looking for replacement parts.

He borrowed a truck from a relative who lived in town and fol- lowed the crude road that led to the village. He found the road fenced off and guarded by hard-

looking men who said that the property was now private. When he said he wanted to get to his village, they waved him off with their weapons and warned him not to come back.

"I don't understand," Green had said on the phone. "Didn't your family live on reservation land ?"

"There were only a handful of our people left. A big paper con- glomerate owned the land. We were squatters, technically, but the company tolerated us. They even used the tribe in ads to show what nice people they were. They sold the land, and the new owners have been working on a big project on the other side of the lake." 'It's their land; they can do what they want to." 'I know, but that doesn't explain what happened to my people."

'Good point. Have you gone to the authorities?"

"It was the first thing I did. I talked to the provincial police. They said they were contacted by a city lawyer who told them that the vil- lagers had been evicted."

"But where did they go?"

"The police asked the same question. The lawyer said they moved on. Probably squatting on someone else's property, he said. You have to understand, my people are considered eccentric anachronisms. The police here say there is nothing they can do. I need help."

As they talked, Green checked his calendar. "I'll have the company plane run me up there tomorrow morning," he said. SOS leased an executive jet that was on standby.

Are you sure.

"Why not? With Marcus tied up in Denmark, I'm nominally in command, and to be honest, having to deal with all the egos and turf wars in this office is driving me bonkers. Tell me where you are."

True to his word, Green had flown into Quebec the following day. He caught a connector flight on a small plane that took him to the town Nighthawk had called from. Ben was waiting at the tiny air- port, the truck packed with camping supplies and ready to go. They drove several hours along back roads and camped

overnight.

Looking at the map by the light of the camp lantern, Green saw that the forest covered a huge area, pockmarked with large bodies of fresh water. Ben's family lived off the land, fished and hunted for a living and brought in hard cash revenue from the sport fishermen and hunters.

Green had suggested hiring a floatplane to take them in, but Nighthawk said that the heavily armed guards he encountered had made it clear that trespassers would be shot. The access road they guarded wasn't the only way to get to the village, Nighthawk said. The next morning, they'd driven a few more hours, never encoun- tering another vehicle, until they'd come to the track that led into the deep woods.

After leaving the truck, they walked now for about an hour, mov- ing like shadows in the silence of the tall trees, until Nighthawk stopped and raised his hand. He froze in place, eyes half-closed, mov- ing his head slightly back and forth like a radar antenna focusing on an incoming target. He seemed to have forsaken the ordinary senses of sight and hearing and was using some inner direction-finder.

As Green watched, fascinated, he thought, You can take the In- dian out of the forest, but you can't take the forest out of the Indian. At last, Nighthawk relaxed, reached into his pack and unscrewed a canteen. He handed it to Green.

"I hate to be a pest," Green said, taking a swig of warm water, "but

how much farther do we have to walk?" Nighthawk pointed toward the line of trees. "About a hundred yards that way is a hunter's trail that will take us to the lake."

"How do you know?" Ben tapped his nose. "No big deal. I've been following the water smell. Try it."

After a sniff or two, Green found to his surprise that he could pick up the faint scent of rotting vegetation and fish mixed with the fragrance of pine. Nighthawk took some water and tucked the can- teen back into his pack. Lowering his voice, he said, "We'll have to be very careful from here on in. I'll communicate with hand signals."

Green gave him the okay sign, and they set off again. Almost im- mediately, the scenery began to change. The trees grew shorter and slimmer as the soil under their feet became sandier. The under- growth thickened, and they had to push their way through thorns that ripped at their clothes.

Shafts of light streamed in from breaks in the trees overhead.

Then, quite suddenly, they could see the sparkle of water. At a sig- nal from Nighthawk, they got down on their hands and knees and made their way to the edge of the lake.

After a moment, Nighthawk stood and walked to the water's edge, with Green following. An elderly Cessna floatplane was tied up at a rickety dock. Nighthawk inspected the plane, finding nothing out of

place. He removed the cowling and gasped when he saw the engine. "Josh, look at this!"

Green peered at the engine. "Looks like someone took an ax to it." The hoses and connections hung loose where they had been cut.

The engine was scarred in a dozen places where it had been hit with something hard.

"This is why no one could fly out of here," Nighthawk said. He pointed to a foot- worn trail that led away from the floatplane dock. "That path leads to the village."

Within minutes, they were making their way to the edge of a clearing. Nighthawk held out his hand for them to stop. Then he squatted on his haunches and peered with sharp eyes through the bushes. "There's no one here," he said finally.

"Are you sure?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Nighthawk said. He walked unafraid into the open, with Green hesitantly taking up the rear.

The village consisted of a dozen or so sturdy-looking log houses, most with porches. They were built on both sides of a swath of packed-down dirt in a rough

approximation of a small town's Main Street, complete with one structure that had a general-store sign on it. Green expected someone to burst out the front door at any mo- ment, but the store and every other house in the village were as still as tombs.

"This is my house, where my parents and my sister lived," Nighthawk said, stopping in front of one of the larger structures.

He went up on the porch and went inside. After a few minutes, he came out, shaking his head. "No one. Everything is in place. Like they just stepped out for a minute."

"I poked my head in a couple of the other places," Green said.

"Same thing. How many people lived here?"

"Forty or so."

"Where could they have gone?"

Nighthawk walked to the edge of the lake a few yards away. He

stood, listening to the quiet lap of the waves. After a moment, he pointed to the opposite shore and said, "Maybe over there?" Green squinted across the lake. "How can you be sure?" "My mother wrote that there was funny stuff going on across the lake. We've got to check it out."

"What kind of funny stuff?" "She said big helicopters were coming in and unloading material

night and day. When the village men went over to investigate, they were run off by guards. Then one day, some guys with guns came over to the village and looked around. They didn't hurt anyone, but my mother figured they'd be back."

"Wouldn't it be better to go tell the authorities? They could send someone in by plane."

"I don't think there's time," Nighthawk said. "Her letter is more than two weeks old. Besides, I can feel danger and death in the air." Green shuddered. He was stuck in the middle of nowhere, and the only person who could get him out was

raving like a medicine man in a B movie.

Sensing his friend's nervousness, Nighthawk smiled and said,

'Don't worry, I'm not going native. That's a good suggestion about the cops. I'd feel better if we checked things out first. C'mon," he said, and they headed back to the knoll they had climbed a few minutes before. They came to a natural overhang of rock. Nighthawk pulled away some branches that covered the opening. Lying upside-down on a crude rack was a birch-bark canoe. Nighthawk ran his hand lov- ingly over the shiny surface.

"I made this myself. Used only traditional materials and tech- niques."

"It's beautiful," Green said. "Straight out of Last of the Mohicans." Better. I've gone all over the lake in it."

They dragged the canoe to the beach, dined on beef jerky and rested as they waited for the sun to go down.

With the approach of dusk, they threw their packs into the canoe, pushed it into the water and started paddling. Night had fallen by the time they drew close to the shore. They had to stop when the canoe hit something solid in the water.

Nighthawk reached down, thinking they had hit a rock. "It's some kind of metal cage. Like a bait box." He scanned the water with his sharp eyes. "The water is filled with them. I smell fish, lots of them. It must be some sort of hatchery operation."

They found a breach in the floating barricade and pointed the canoe toward land. Something stirred and splashed in the metal cages, confirming Nighthawk's theory of a fish hatchery. Eventually they came to the outer end of a floating dock lit by dim ankle-high lights they had seen from the water. Tied up to a series of finger piers were several Jet Skis and powerboats. Next to the smaller watercraft was a large catamaran. It had a conveyor belt running down the middle, and Nighthawk guessed that it was used in the hatchery operation.

"I've got an idea," Green said. Working systematically, he pulled the ignition keys from the Jet Skis and the boats and threw them into the water. Then they tucked the canoe in between the other craft, covered it with a borrowed tarp and climbed onto the pier.

Where the dock joined the shore, it continued as a blacktop walk- way that led inland. Nighthawk and Green decided to keep to the woods. After walking a few minutes, they encountered a wide dirt track, as if a big bulldozer had plowed its way through the forest. They followed the swath and came up on a row of trucks and earth- moving machinery arranged in neat rows behind a huge storage building. Using the shed as a shield, they peered around the corner and saw that they were at the edge of an open area carved out of the woods. It was brightly illuminated by a ring of portable halogen lights. Mechanized shovels were flattening down the dirt, and great road-building machines were laying down swathes of blacktop. Work crews armed with shovels were smoothing out the hot asphalt in preparation for it to be flattened down by the steamrollers.

Nighthawk said, "What do we do next, Professor?"

"How long do we have until daybreak?"

"About five hours to first light. It would be smart to be back on the lake before then."

Green sat with his back against a tree. "Let's keep an eye on what's going on until then. I'll take the first watch." Shortly after midnight, Ben took over. Green stretched out on the ground and closed his eyes. The cleared area was now almost deserted except for a few armed men lounging around. Nighthawk blinked his eyes and reached over to tap Green's shoulder.

"Uh, Josh-" Green sat up and looked toward the plaza. "What the hell-?"

Beyond the clearing, where there were only woods before, was a huge dome-shaped structure whose mottled surface glowed bluish white. It seemed to have appeared by magic.

"What is that thing?" Ben whispered. "And where did it come from?"

"You got me," Green said.

"Maybe it's a hotel."

"Naw," Green said. "Too functional-looking. Would you stay in a place like that?"

"I grew up in a log cabin. Any place bigger than that is a hotel." "I don't mean to disparage your home territory, but can you see fishermen and hunters flocking here? That thing belongs in Las Vegas."

"We're talking North Pole, man. Looks like an overgrown igloo." Green had to admit the dome had the same contours as the Eskimo shelters he had seen in National Geographic. But instead of hard snow, the surface appeared to be a translucent plastic material. Huge hangar doors were set into the base of the dome, overlooking the open area, which was being built as a plaza.

As they watched, there were signs of new activity. The plaza was becoming busy again. The construction crew had returned, along with more armed men, who could be seen glancing up at the night sky. Before long, the sound of engines could be heard from above.

Then a gigantic object moved across the night sky and blotted out the stars.

"Look at the dome," Nighthawk said.

A vertical seam had appeared in the top of the structure. The seam widened into a wedge, then the top half of the dome peeled back like the sections of an orange until it was completely open. Light streamed out of the dome's interior and bathed the silvery skin of a gigantic torpedo-shaped object that moved slowly to a position exactly above the vast opening.

"We were both wrong," Nighthawk said. "Our Las Vegas hotel is a blimp hangar."

Green had been studying the contours of the enormous aircraft. "You ever see that old news footage about the Hindenburg, that big German airship that caught fire and burned back in the 1930s?"

"But what's something like that doing here "I think we may find out very soon," Green said. The descending airship sank into the structure, and the sections of the dome moved back into place and restored the round shape. Be- fore long, the doors overlooking the plaza slid open, and a group of men emerged from inside the structure. They were dressed in black uniforms, and all had dark, swarthy complexions. They swarmed around a man whose bullish head was set on powerful shoulders.

The man walked over to the edge of the plaza and inspected the progress of the work. Nighthawk had paid little attention to the workers before. But now he could see that, unlike the uniformed men, these people were dressed in jeans and work shirts, and armed guards were watching them.

"Oh hell! "he whispered.

"What's wrong?" Green said.

"Those are men from my village. That's my brother and father.

But I don't see my mother or any of the other women."

The leader continued on his inspection tour, walking around the edge of the plaza. The men who had been guarding the workers watched their leader's progress. Taking advantage of their inatten- tion, one of the laborers had edged closer to the woods. Then he dropped his shovel and made a break for freedom. Something about the way he ran, with a slight limp, looked familiar to Nighthawk.

"That's my cousin," he said. "I can tell by the way he runs. He hurt his foot bad when we were kids."

One of the guards glanced back and saw the fleeing man. He raised his gun to fire, but lowered it at an apparent command from the bull-headed man. He stepped over to a stack of tools and snatched up a sharp-tipped metal pike from the pile. He held it lightly in two hands, drew back like a javelin thrower, then snapped the pike for- ward with all the strength of his squat, powerful body.

The missile flew through the air in a metallic blur. It had been thrown expertly ahead of the runner in a high looping trajectory and timed so that it caught him between the shoulder blades. He went down, pinned like a butterfly in a collection book. By then, the leader had turned his back and didn't even see him fall.

The whole scene-the aborted escape and the killing of his cousin-had taken only a few seconds. Nighthawk had watched, frozen in place, but now he lunged forward and, despite Green's at- tempts to hold him back, broke from cover and ran toward his cousin's body.

Green scrambled after the young Indian and brought him down in a flying tackle. He was on his feet a second later, pulling Nighthawk to his feet by the scruff of his neck. They were clearly vis- ible in the bright glare of lights. Nighthawk saw the guns pointed in their direction, and his instincts took over.

He and Green dashed for the woods. Shots rang out and Green fell. Nighthawk stopped and went to help his companion, but the bullet had caught Green in the back of the head and destroyed his skull. Nighthawk turned and ran, geysers of earth erupting around his feet. He dove into the forest, while a fusillade from the plaza shredded the branches over his head. Under a shower of twigs and leaves, he dashed through the trees until he came to the edge of the lake and his feet pounded onto the dock.

He saw the Jet Skis and wished Green had kept one ignition key. Nighthawk unsheathed a hunting knife from his belt and sliced the mooring lines. Then he shoved the watercraft as far away from the dock as he could. He whipped the tarp from the canoe, pushed off and began to paddle furiously. He was in open water when he saw muzzle flashes from the dock area and heard the rattle of automatic- arms fire. The shooters were firing blind, and their bullets were hit- ting the water off to one side.

The canoe flew across the lake until it was out of range. Night- hawk continued to paddle with all his strength. Once he had gained the other shore, he could lose himself in the deep woods. It is never entirely dark on water, which catches and magnifies even the tiniest speck of light. But now, the lake around him began to glow as if it were infused with a luminescent chemical. He turned and saw that the light was not coming from the lake, but was a reflection.

Behind him, a wide shaft of light was shining toward the heavens. The dome was opening. The airship was rising slowly into the air. When it was a few hundred feet over the trees, the airship headed to- ward the lake. Bathed in the eerie light from below, the airship looked like an avenging monster out of some time- shrouded myth. Instead of approaching on a straight line, the airship turned sharply and moved along the shore. Beams of light shot out from its under- belly and probed the surface of the lake.

After making its first pass, the airship turned onto a parallel track. Rather than make a random thrust into the space over the lake, the airship was conducting a

thorough search, using a lawn-mowing pat- tern. Nighthawk was paddling for all he was worth, but it would be only a matter of minutes before the searchlights dancing over the lake's surface caught the canoe.

The airship made another turn and started back on a course that would take it directly over the canoe. Once spotted, the canoe would be an easy target. Nighthawk knew there was only one option avail- able to him. He drew his hunting knife and slashed a hole in the bot- tom of the canoe. Cold water poured in and surged around his waist. The water was up to his neck, as the airship blotted out the sky al- most directly overhead. The guttural noise of its engines blocked out all other sound.

Nighthawk ducked his head and held on to the sinking canoe to keep it below the surface. Above him, the water glowed white from the moving bull's-eyes, then went black again. He stayed under as long as he could, then, gasping for breath, he popped his head out of the water.

The airship had turned for another pass. Nighthawk could hear another sound mingling with the throb of engines. The whine and snarl of Jet Skis. Someone must have had spare ignition keys. Nighthawk swam off at an angle, away from the village.

Minutes later, he saw lights scudding across the lake at great speed as the Jet Skis made directly for the deserted village. Nighthawk kept swimming until he felt soft muck under his feet. He crawled up onto the shore, exhausted from the swim, but he rested only long enough to wring water out of his shirt.

Lights were coming his way along the beach.

Nighthawk took one last, sorrowful look across the lake, before he melted into the woods like a sodden wraith.

20

ABROAD SMILE CROSSED Austin's bronzed face as the taxi crunched onto the long gravel driveway in Fairfax, Virginia. Austin paid his fare from Duties Airport and sprinted up the steps of the Victorian boathouse, part of an old estate fronting on the Potomac River. He dropped his bags inside the door, swept his eye around the combination study-den and the familiar line from Robert Louis Stevenson came to mind.

Home is the sailor, home from sea.

Like Austin himself, his house was a study in contrasts. He was a man of action whose physical strength, courage and quickness made him a force to be reckoned with. Yet he possessed a cool intellect, and he often drew inspiration from the great minds of centuries past. His work often involved the latest in high-tech gadgets, but his respect for the past was crystallized in the brace of dueling pistols that hung over his fireplace. It was part of a collection of more than two hun- dred sets, to which he was always adding, despite the limitations of a government salary.

The dichotomy in his personality was reflected in the comfortable dark-wood Colonial furniture that contrasted with the plain white walls, like those in a New York art gallery, that were hung with con- temporary originals. His extensive bookshelves groaned under the weight of hundreds of books that included first editions of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, and well-worn volumes containing the writings of the great philosophers. While he could spend hours studying the works and wisdom of Plato and Kant, his extensive music library was heavy on progressive jazz. Curiously, there was lit- tle to indicate that he spent most of his working days on or under the sea, except for a primitive painting of a clipper ship and a few other sailing vessels, a photo of his catboat under full sail and a glass- encased model of his racing hydroplane.

Austin had lovingly converted the boathouse into a residence, doing much of the work himself. His assignments for NUMA, and before that for the CIA, took him all over the globe. But when his work was done, he could always return to his safe harbor, drop sail and throw the anchor over the side. All that was needed to make the nautical analogy complete, he reflected, was a ration of grog.

He went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of dark rum and Jamaican ginger beer. The ice tinkled pleasantly in his glass as he threw the doors open to release the musty smell. He went out onto the deck, where he filled his lungs with the fresh river air and surveyed the slow-moving Potomac in the vanishing light. Nothing had changed. The river was as beautiful and serene as ever.

He stretched out in a wood-slatted Adirondack chair, lay back and stared at the sky as if the stars could tell him what was behind the events of the last few days. His misadventures in the Faroe Islands and in Copenhagen would have been the

stuff of dreams if not for the itch on his chest where the knife wound was healing and the ten- der swelling under his hair where a club had connected with his nog- mn. He could draw a straight line from the sabotage of the SOS ship to the attack on a quiet Copenhagen street. The dark impulses that had inspired the sabotage of the SOS ship were obviously a means to an end. Simply put, someone wanted SOS out of the picture. When Austin had gotten nosey, he'd become a target, first in Skaalshavn and later in Copenhagen.

The situation could be summed up in a simple equation: When- ever someone got too close to a company called Oceanus, the results could be disastrous. His thoughts drifted back to the Faroe Islands fish farm and the thing in the fish tank that had scared the hell out of him. A miasma of pure evil seemed to hang over the Oceanus op- eration. What had Jorgensen said? Unholy. Then there was the Basque tycoon, Balthazar Aguirrez, and his Quixotic quest. What was that all about?

Austin went over the events of the past several days in his mind until he felt his eyelids drooping. He downed the last of his drink, climbed the stairs to his bedroom in the turret surmounting the mansard roof, and turned in. He slept soundly and was up and dressed early the next morning, refreshed by a night's sleep and stim- ulated by a pot of strong Kona coffee. He telephoned an old friend at the CIA to make sure he would be in, then called his NUMA of- fice to say he'd be late.

Unlike his colleague Dirk Pitt, who collected antique autos and relished driving them, Austin was indifferent when it came to ground transportation. Driving a sedan from the NUMA car pool, nondescript except for its turquoise color, he headed to Langley, along a route he knew well from his days with the CIA, and parked his car next to dozens of other government vehicles. Security at the sprawl- ing complex was tighter since 9/11.

Herinan Perez, whom he had called earlier, was waiting in the vis- itors' area. Perez was a slightly built man with an olive complexion and dark-brown eyes that matched his thinning hair. Perez helped speed the check-in process through security and led Austin through the labyrinth of corridors to an office uncluttered by a scrap of paper. The only objects on the desktop were a computer monitor, a tele- phone and a photo of an attractive woman and two cute children.

"Kurt, it's great to see you!" Perez said, motioning for Austin to sit down.

"Thinking of jumping Sandecker's ship to come back into the Company? We'd love to have you. The cloak-and-dagger stuff you're so good at has become respectable at Langley once again."

"Admiral Sandecker might have something to say about that. But I'll have to admit that I still get misty-eyed when I think about the fun we had on our last job."

"The secret missile retrieval job we did off Gibraltar," Perez said with a boyish grin. "Oh boy, that was something."

"I was thinking about that on the drive over this morning. How long has it been?"

"Too damned long. You know something, Kurt, I still hear little flamenco dancers in my head whenever I drink Spanish wine." A dreamy look came into Perez's face. "By God, we had some good times, didn't we?"

Austin nodded in agreement. "The world has changed a lot since then."

Perez laughed in reply. "Not for you, old pal! Hell, I read about that amazing rescue you pulled off in the Faroe Islands. You haven't changed a bit, you old sea dog. Still the same swashbuckling Austin."

Austin groaned. "These days, for every minute swashing buckles, I spend an hour at my desk dealing with reports."

"I hear you! I could do without the paperwork, although I've got- ten to like my nine-to-five schedule since I became a father. Two kids, would you believe it? Being a desk jockey isn't all bad. You might want to try it."

"No, thanks. I'd rather have my eyeballs tattooed."

Perez laughed. "Well, you didn't come here to talk about the good ol' days. You said on the phone that you were looking for background info on Balthazar Aguirrez. What's your interest in him, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all. I ran into Aguirrez in the Faroe Islands. He seemed like a fascinating character. I know he's a shipbuilding magnate, but I suspected there was more to him than meets the eye."

"You met him?"

"He was fishing. So was I."

"I should have known," Perez said. "Trouble attracts trouble."

"Why is he trouble?"

"What do you know about the Basque separatist movement?"

"It's been around a long time. Every so often, Basque terrorists blow up a public building or assassinate an innocent government of- ficial."

"That pretty much sums it up," Perez said. "There's been talk for decades of a separate Basque state that would straddle Spain and France. The most radical separatist group, ETA, started fighting for an autonomous Basque state in 1968. When Franco died in 1975, the new Spanish government gave the Basques more political power, but the ETA wants the whole enchilada. They've killed more than eight hundred people since taking up the cause. Anyone who is not on their side is an enemy."

"A familiar story around the world, unfortunately."

"The political wing of the separatist movement is the Batasuna party. Some people have compared it to Sinn Fein, the public face of the IRA. The Spanish government threw up its hands after more as- sassinations and the discovery of a big ETA weapons cache. Auton- omy wasn't working, so they banned Batasuna and started to crack down on the whole separatist movement."

"Where does Aguirrez fit in to this bloody little picture?"

"Your instincts were right about there being more to him than meets the eye. He has been a major backer of Batasuna. The gov- ernment has accused him of financing terrorism."

"I liked him. He didn't look like a terrorist," Austin said, recall- ing his benefactor's bluff and down-to-earth manners.

"Sure, and Joe Stalin looked like somebody's grandfather."

Austin remembered the yacht's tough-looking crew and the heavy- duty armament that the vessel carried. "So, are the charges true?"

"He freely admits to supporting Batasuna, but points out that it was a legitimate party when he gave them money. The government suspects he's still channeling money into the movement. They have no proof, and Aguirrez is too well-connected to bring into court with flimsy evidence."

"What's your take on the guy?"

"In all my years in Spain, I never met him, which was why I was surprised when you said you had. I think he's a moderate who'd like to see a peaceful separatist solution, but the ETA murders have un- dermined his cause. He's afraid the crackdown will rekindle the con- flict and endanger innocent citizens. He may be right."

"Sounds like he's walking a very thin tightrope."

"Some people say that the pressure's made him unhinged. He's been talking about a way to rally European public opinion in favor of a Basque nation. Did he give you any hint of what's on his mind ?" Perez narrowed his dark eyes. "Surely you didn't talk just about fishing."

"He struck me as very proud of his Basque heritage-his yacht is named the Nat/arm. He didn't say a word about politics. We talked mostly about archaeology. He's an amateur archaeologist with strong interest in his own ancestors."

"You make him sound like a contender for the nutty professor. Let

me give you a warning, old friend. The Spanish police would love to nail him to the wall. They have no direct proof linking him to ter- rorist acts, but when they do, you don't want to be in their way."

"I'll remember that. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Hell, Kurt, it's the least I could do for a former comrade-in- arms."

Before Perez had the chance to start reminiscing again, Austin glanced at his watch. "Got to get moving. Thanks for your time."

"Not at all. Let's get together for lunch sometime. We miss you here. The brass is still ticked off about Sandecker grabbing you for NUMA."

Austin rose from his chair. "Maybe we'll work on a joint opera- tion someday."

Perez smiled. "I'd like that," he said.

The Washington traffic had let up, and before long, Austin saw the sun gleaming on the green glass facade of the thirty-story NUMA building overlooking the Potomac. He groaned when he walked into his office. His efficient secretary had neatly piled the pink call-back slips in the center of his desk. In addition, he would have to dig him- self out of an avalanche of e-mail messages before he got down to preparing a report on Oceanus.

Ah, the exciting life of a swashbuckler! He scrolled through his e- mail, deleted half of it as nonessential and shuffled through his pink slips. There was a message from Paul and Gamay. They had gone to Canada to check into an Oceanus operation. Zavala had left a call on his answering machine saying he would be home that night in time for a hot date. Some things never change, Austin thought with a shake of his head. His handsome and charming partner was much in demand among Washington's female set. Austin sighed and began to tap away at his computer. He was wrapping up the first draft when the phone rang.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Austin. I was hoping I'd find you in your office."

Austin smiled at the sound of Them's voice. "I'm already pining for the high seas. Your flight home on the Concorde went well, I trust.

"Yes, but I don't know why I hurried back. My in-box is filled with depositions and briefs. But I didn't call to complain. I'd like to get to- gether with you."

"I'm halfway out the door. A walk maybe. Cocktails and dinner. Then, who knows?"

"We'll have to put the 'who knows?' on hold for now. This is busi- ness. Marcus wants to talk to you."

"I'm really starting to dislike your friend. He keeps getting in the way of what may be the love affair of the century."

"This is important, Kurt."

"Okay, I'll meet with him, with one condition. We make a date for tonight."

"It's a deal."

She gave Austin a time and place for the meeting. Them's charm notwithstanding, he had agreed to talk to Ryan because he had come to a dead end and thought he might learn something new. He hung up, leaned back in his swivel chair and laced his fingers behind his head. It was easy to bring his thoughts around to Oceanus. His chest ached when he raised his arm, and the pain made an effective mem- ory aid.

He wondered if the Trouts had turned up anything. They hadn't called since leaving their message. He tried to reach them on their cell phone and got no answer. He didn't worry. Paul and Gamay were fully capable of taking care of themselves. Next, he called Rudi Gunn, NUMA's assistant director, and set up a luncheon meeting. Rudi's famed analytical skills might help guide him through the dense thicket surrounding the mysterious corporation.

Gunn was bound to home in on Aguirrez when he read the report, questioning whether there was any link between Basque terrorism and Oceanus violence. Aguirrez had mentioned his ancestor, Diego. Austin pondered the Basque's obsession with his forebear and thought that Aguirrez might be on to something. From his own ex- perience, Austin knew that the past is always the key to the present. He needed someone who could guide him back five centuries. One person came to mind immediately. Austin picked up the phone and punched out a number.

21

THE WORLD-FAMOUS marine historian and gourmand, St. Julien Perlmutter, was in an agony of ecstasy. He sat outside a three-hundred-year-old Tuscan villa whose shaded terrace had a breathtaking view of rolling vineyards. Visible in the distance, dom- inating the Renaissance city of Florence, was the Duomo. The wide oak table before him groaned with Italian cuisine, from pungent sausage made locally, to a thick, rare beefsteak Florentine. There was so much wonderful food, and so many wonderful colors and fragrances, in fact, that he was having a hard time trying to decide where to start.

"Get a grip on yourself, old man," he muttered, stroking his gray beard as he stared at the spread. "Wouldn't do to starve to death amid all this plenty/'

At four hundred pounds, Perlmutter was in little danger of wast- ing away. Since arriving in Italy ten days before, he had eaten his way up the Italian boot on a promotional tour for an Italian-American food magazine. He had trudged through wineries, trattorias and smokehouses, posed for photo opportunities in refrigerator rooms full of hanging prosciutto, and delivered lectures on the history of food going back to the Etruscans. He had dined on sumptuous feasts everywhere he stopped. The sensory overload had brought him to his present impasse.

The cell phone in his suit pocket trilled. Grateful for the distrac- tion from his quandary, he flipped the phone open. "State your busi- ness in a concise and businesslike manner."

"You're a hard man to find, St. Julien."

The sky-blue eyes in the ruddy face danced with pleasure at the sound of the familiar voice ofKurt Austin.

"To the contrary, Kurt m'lad. I'm like Hansel and Gretel. Follow the food crumbs, and you'll find me nibbling at the gingerbread house."

"It was easier to follow the suggestion of your housekeeper. She told me you were in Italy. How's the tour going?"

Perlmutter patted his substantial stomach. "It's very fulfilling, to say the least. All goes well in the District of Columbia, I trust?"

"As far as I know. I just flew back from Copenhagen last night."

"Ah, the city ofHans Christian Andersen and the Little Mermaid. I remember when I was there some years ago, there was this restau- rant I dined at-"

Austin cut Perlmutter off before he launched into a course-by- course account of his meal. "I'd love to hear about it. But right now, I need your historical expertise."

"Always willing to talk about food or history. Fire away." Perl- mutter was often asked to lend his expertise to NUMA queries.

"Have you ever come across a Basque mariner by the name of Diego Aguirrez? Fifteenth or sixteenth century."

Perlmutter dug into his encyclopedic mind. "Ah yes, something to do with the Song of Roland, the epic French poem."

"Chanson de Roland? I struggled through that as part of a high school French course."

"Then you know the legend. Roland was the nephew of the em- peror

Charlemagne. He held off the Saracens at Roncesvalles with the help of his magic sword, Durendal. As he was dying, Roland beat his sword against a rock to keep it out of the hands of his enemies, but it wouldn't break. He blew his horn to summon help. Charle- magne, hearing it, came with his armies, but it was too late. Roland was dead. Through the centuries, Roland became a Basque hero, a symbol of their stubborn character."

"How do we get from Roland to Aguirrez?"

"I recall a reference to the Aguirrez family in an eighteenth cen- tury treatise on pre-Columbian voyages to the Americas. Aguirrez was said to have made many fishing trips to North American waters decades before Columbus's voyage. Unfortunately, he ran afoul of the Spanish Inquisition. There were unverified reports he had been en- trusted with the Roland relics."

"From what you say, the Roland story was not just a legend. The sword and the horn actually existed."

"The Inquisition apparently thought so. They feared the relics could be used to rally the Basques."

"What happened to Aguirrez and the relics?" "They both disappeared. There is no record of a shipwreck that I can recall. May I ask what prompts your interest in the subject?" "I met a descendant of Diego Aguirrez. He's retracing the voyage

of his long-lost ancestor, but he never said anything about sacred relics."

"I'm not surprised. Basque separatists are still setting off bombs in Spain. Lord knows what would happen if they got their hands on po- tent symbols like this."

"Do you remember anything else about Aguirrez?" "Not off the top of my head. I'll dig around in my books when I aet home." Perlmutter owned one of the world's finest marine li- braries. "I'll be back in Georgetown in a few days, after a stop-off in Milan."

"You've been a great help as usual. We'll talk again. Buon ap- petito."

"Grazier Perlmutter said, clicking off his phone. He turned his

attention back to the table. He was about to dig in to a plate of marinated artichoke hearts when his host, who owned the villa and the surrounding vineyards, came in with the bottle of wine he had gone for.

Shock registered on the man's face. "You're not touching your food. Are you ill?"

"Oh no, Signor Nocci. I was distracted by a telephone call re- garding a question of a historical nature."

The silver-haired Italian nodded. "Perhaps a taste of the chingali, the wild boar, will help your memory. The sauce was made from truffles found in my woods."

"A splendid suggestion, my friend." With the dam breached, Perl- mutter dug into the food with his usual gusto. Nocci politely held his curiosity at bay while his guest devoured the repast. But when Perl- mutter dabbed his small mouth and set his napkin aside, Nocci said, I am an amateur historian. It is impossible not to be when one lives in a country surrounded by the remnants of countless civilizations. Perhaps I can help you with your question."

Perlmutter poured himself another glass of 1997 Chianti and re- counted his conversation with Austin. The Italian cocked his head.

"I know nothing about this Basque, but your story brings to mind something I came across while doing some research in the Biblioteca Laurenziana.f)

"I visited the Laurentian Library many years ago. I was fascinated by the manuscripts."

"More than ten thousand masterpieces," Nocci said, nodding his head. "As you know, the library was founded by the Medici family to house their priceless collection of papers. I have been writing a paper on Lorenzo the Magnificent which I hope to publish some day, although I doubt if anyone will read it."

"Be assured, / shall read it," Perlmutter said grandly. "Then it will have been worth my labor," Nocci said. "Anyway, one of the hazards of research is the temptation to wander away from the highway, and while I was at the library, I traveled a side road that led to the Medici Pope Leo X. With the death of King Ferdinand in 1516, his seventeen-year-old successor, Charles V, encountered pres- sure to restrict the power of the Inquisition. In the great humanist tradition of the Medici family, Leo favored curtailing the Inquisitors. But Charles's

advisors persuaded the young king that the Inquisition was essential to maintain his rule, and the persecution continued an- other three hundred years."

"A sad chapter in human history. It's comforting to know that

Aguirrez had the courage to speak out, but the dark forces are strong."

"And none was darker than a Spaniard named Martinez. He sent a letter to the king urging him to support the Inquisition and expand its powers. As far as I can determine, the letter was forwarded to Leo for his comment and came to the library with the Pope's other pa- pers." He shook his head. "It is the fanatical raving of a monster. Martinez hated the Basques, wanted them wiped from the face of the earth. I remember there was a mention of Roland, which I recall thinking was unusual in this context."

"What was the nature of this reference?"

Nocci heaved a great sigh and tapped his head with his forefinger. "I can't remember. One of the consequences of growing old."

"Perhaps you'll remember after more wine."

"I trust the wine more than my memory," Nocci said, with a smile. "The assistant curator at the library is a friend of mine. Please relax, and I will make a telephone call." He was back in a few minutes. "She says she would be happy to produce the letter I mentioned for us any time we want to look at it."

Perlmutter pushed his great bulk back from the table and rose to his feet. "I think perhaps a little exercise would do me some good."

The trip to Florence took less than fifteen minutes. Nocci usually drove a Fiat, but in expectation ofPerlmutter's visit, he had leased a Mercedes, which more comfortably accommodated his guest's wide girth. They parked near the leather and souvenir stalls that abounded in the Piazza San Lorenzo and went through an entrance to the left of the Medici family's old parish chapel.

Passing into the quiet cloisters, they left the bustle of commerce be- hind them and climbed the Michelangelo stairs into the reading room. The sturdy frame that supported Perlmutter's large figure al- lowed more agility than would have seemed possible under the laws of gravity. Still, he was puffing from the exertion

of climbing the staircase and gladly agreed when Nocci said that he would fetch his friend. Perlmutter strolled past the rows of carved straight-backed benches, basking in the light that was filtering through the high win- dows as he breathed in the musty odor of antiquity.

Nocci returned after a minute with a handsome middle-aged Woman, whom he introduced as Mara Maggi, the assistant curator.

She had the reddish-blond hair and fair Florentine complexion that showed up so often in Botticelli paintings.

Perlmutter shook her hand. "Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Signora Maggi."

She greeted Perlmutter with a radiant smile. "Not at all. It is a pleasure to open our collection to someone of such repute. Please come with me. The letter you wish to see is in my office."

She led the way to a space whose window overlooked the cloister garden and settled Perlmutter in a small anteroom that had a spare desk and a couple of chairs. Several pages of wrinkled parchment lay in an open vellum-bound wooden box. She left the two men alone and said to call if they needed any help.

Nocci gingerly lifted the first parchment page from the folder and held it by the edges. "My Spanish is not too bad. If you'll allow me...

Perlmutter nodded and Nocci began to read. As he listened, Perl- mutter decided that he had seldom heard writing that dripped with so much venom and bloodthirsty hatred. The diatribe was a litany of charges directed at the Basques- witchcraft and Satanism among them. Even the uniqueness of their language was used in evidence. Martinez was obviously a madman. But behind his ravings was a clever political message to the young Medici king: To restrict the In- quisition would diminish the power of the throne.

"Ah," Nocci said, adjusting his reading glasses, "here is the pas- sage I was telling you about. Martinez writes:

But it is their tendency to rebellion I fear the most. They are at- tached to relics. They have the Sword, and the Horn, to which they attribute great powers. It gives them the power to rebel. Which will threaten the authority of the church

and of your kingdom, my lord.

There is one among them, a man called Aguirrez, who is at the heart of this sedition. I have vowed to pursue him to the ends of the earth, to reclaim these relics. Sire, if our Sacred Mission is not al- lowed to continue its work until heresy is uprooted from the land, I fear the call of Roland's horn will summon our enemies to battle and that his Blade will lay waste to all we hold dear."

"Interesting," Perlmutter said, knitting his brow. "First of all, he seems to be saying that the relics are real. And second, that this fel- low Aguirrez has them in his possession. This certainly backs up the legendary accounts of Roland's fall."

Signora Maggi poked her head in the door and asked if they needed anything. Nocci thanked her and said, "This is a fascinating document. Do you have any more papers authored by this man Mar- tmez.

"I'm very sorry, but there is nothing I can think of."

Perlmutter tented his fingers and said, "Martinez comes across in his writings as a man of great ego. I would be surprised if he did not keep a journal of his day-to-day activities. It would be wonderful if such a book existed and we could get our hands on it. Perhaps at the state archives in Seville."

Signora Maggi was only half-listening. She was reading a sheet of paper that had been tucked into the box with the other records. "This is a list of all the manuscripts in this box. Apparently, one of the doc- uments was taken from this file by a previous curator and sent on to the Venice State Archives."

"What sort of document?" Perlmutter asked.

"It is described here as an 'Exoneration of a Man of the Sea,' writ- ten by an Englishman, Captain Richard Blackthorne. It was sup- posed to be returned, but there are more than ninety kilometers of archives covering a thousand years of history, so sometimes things fall through the cracks, as you Americans say."

"I'd love to read Blackthorne's account," Perlmutter said. "I'm due in Milan tomorrow, but perhaps I can divert to Venice."

"Perhaps it won't be necessary." She took the file into her office, and they could hear the soft clicking of a computer keyboard. She reap- peared after a moment.

"I have contacted the Venice State Archives and asked for a virtual search of the records. Once the document is found, it can be copied and transmitted through the Internet."

"Well done!" Perlmutter said. "And my heartfelt thanks."

Signora Maggi kissed Perlmutter on both fleshy cheeks, and be- fore long he and Nocci were driving through the suburbs of Flo- rence. Exhausted by the activities of the day, Perlmutter took a nap and awoke just in time for dinner. He and Nocci dined on the ter- race. He had regained his gustatory equilibrium and had no trouble downing his veal and pasta dishes. After finishing up with a spinach salad and a simple doici of fresh fruit, they watched the sun go down, silently sipping on glasses oflimoncello.

The phone rang and Nocci went to answer it, while Perlmutter sat in the dark, savoring the smell of earth and grapevines, carried to his tulip nose by a light evening breeze. Nocci appeared a few minutes later and summoned Perlmutter into a small state-of-the-art com- puter room.

Noting his guest's upraised eyebrow, Nocci said, "Even a business as small as mine must use the latest in communications in order to survive in the global market. That was Signora Maggi," he said, sit- ting down in front of the monitor. "She apologizes for the delay, but the document you requested had to be retrieved from the Museo Storico Navale, the naval museum, where it had been languishing. Here," he said, and rose to give up his seat.

The sturdy wooden chair creaked in protest when Perlmutter set- tied in. He scanned the title page, on which the author declared the iournal to be "an account of an unwilling mercenary in the service of the Spanish Inquisition."

Perlmutter leaned forward, stared into the screen and began to read the words that had been written five centuries before.

22

THE BEER TRUCK rounded a sharp curve, and the driver slammed on his brakes to avoid hitting the battered wreck in the road. The car that lay on its side a few yards from the edge looked as if it had been dropped from a great height. Two more wrecks smoldered at the bottom of the drop-off hundreds of feet below. The driver hurried from his truck and peered into the car window. He was

surprised to discover that the people inside were still alive.

The trucker called for help on his CB radio. The rescue crew had to use mechanical jaws to extricate the Trouts, and then the couple was taken to a small but well-equipped hospital. Paul suffered from a broken wrist, Gamay had a concussion, and they were both covered with bumps and bruises. They spent the night under observation, went through another exam the next morning and were pronounced fit to go. They were signing out at the front desk, when two men wearing rumpled suits arrived, identified themselves as provincial police and asked to talk with them.

They settled into an unoccupied visitors' lounge, and the Trouts were asked to tell what happened. The senior man was named Mac- Farlane. In a classic good-cop, bad-cop pairing, he was the friendly one who tut-tutted, while his partner, a man named Duffy, was the belligerent officer who tried to pick holes in their story.

After replying to a particularly pointed question, Gamay, who could never be mistaken for a shrinking violet, stared at Duffy and gave him a smile. "I may be wrong, Officer, but it sounds as if we're being accused of something."

MacFarlane fidgeted with his hands. "It's not that, ma'am, but look at it from our point of view. You and your husband arrive in town from out of nowhere. Within twenty-four hours, a fisherman you were seen with goes missing, along with his boat. Then four men are killed in a very unusual accident."

"Damned bloody death plague if you ask me," Duffy growled.

"We've told you everything," Paul said. "We were on vacation, and went out with a fisherman named Mike Neal, whom we met at a waterfront restaurant. You can check with the bartender. Mr. Neal was looking for work and offered to take us out for a cruise."

"Pretty expensive cruise," Duffy sneered. "The boatyard says you paid offNeal's bill of nearly a thousand dollars."

"We're both ocean scientists. When we learned about the problems the fishermen had been having with low catches, we asked Mr. Neal to do some survey work."

"What happened next?"

"We stayed overnight at a bed and breakfast. The next morning, we learned that Mr. Neal and his boat had been lost. We were con- tinuing our trip, when we were caught between two very bad driv- ers driving two very big cars."

"From what you said," Duffy said, making no attempt to hide his

skepticism, "it sounds like these folks were trying to run you off the road."

"It seems that way."

"That's what we can't figure," Duffy said, scratching the stubble

on his chin. "Why would they try to kill a couple of innocent tourists?"

"You'll have to ask them," Paul said.

Duffy's ruddy face went an even deeper red. He opened his mouth to respond.

MacFarlane raised his hand to shush his partner. "Those folks are in no condition to answer questions," he said with a wan smile. "But you see, this presents another problem. The young lady here stopped at a general store and asked about a fish plant in town. The four gentlemen who were killed were all employees of the same plant."

"I'm a marine biologist," Gamay said. "My interest in fish is noth- ing odd. I don't mean to tell you how to do your job," she said, in a tone that indicated that was exactly what she was doing, "but maybe you should talk to someone at the plant."

"That's another funny thing," Duffy said. "The plant's closed."

Gamay hid her surprise with a shrug and girded herself for more questions, but just then, MacFarlane's cell phone rang, saving them from another round of the third degree. He excused himself, got up and moved into the hall, out of earshot. A few minutes later, he came back in and said, "Thanks for your time, folks. You can go."

"I won't argue with you, Officer, but could you tell us what's going on?" Paul said. "A minute ago, we were public enemies one and two."

The worried expression that had been on MacFarlane's face ear- lier was replaced by a friendly smile. "That was the station. We made some inquiries when we saw the ID cards in your wallets. Just got a call from Washington. Seems like you two are pretty important peo- ple at NUMA. We'll prepare a couple of statements and get them to you for additions and signatures. Anywhere we can take you?" He seemed relieved at the resolution of a difficult situation.

"A rental-car agency might be a good start," Gamay said.

"And a pub would be a good finish," Paul said.

On the drive to the car rental office, Duffy dropped his bad-cop act and told them how to get to a pub where the beer and food were good and cheap. The policemen, who were going off-duty, invited themselves along, too. By the time they got into their second pint, the detectives were very talkative. They had retraced the Trouts' foot- steps, talking to the B-and-B owners and a few regulars around the waterfront. Mike Neal was still missing, and the man named Gro- gan had also disappeared. There was no telephone number for the Oceanus plant. They were still trying to contact the corporation's in- ternational office, but were having little luck.

Gamay ordered another beer after the police officers left. She blew off the foamy head and, in an accusatory tone, said, "That's the last time I take a drive in the country with you."

"At least you didn't break any bones. I have to drink my beer with my left hand. And how am I going to tie my bow ties?"

"Heaven forbid you use snap-ons, you poor boy. Have you seen the dark circle under my eye? I believe it's what we called a mouse when I was a kid."

Paul leaned over and lightly kissed his wife on the cheek. "On you, it looks exotic."

"I suppose that's better than nothing," Gamay said, with an in- dulgent smile. "What do we do now? We can't go back to Wash- ington with nothing to show but a few lumps and repair bills for a nonexistent boat."

He sipped his beer. "What was the name of that scientist Mike Neal tried to

contact?"

"Throckmorton. Neal said he was at McGill University." "Montreal! Why not drop by and see him, as long as we're in the neighborhood?"

"Brilliant idea!" Gamay said. "Enjoy your beer, Lefty. I'll update Kurt on our plans."

Gamay took her cell phone to a relatively quiet corner of the pub and called NUMA. Austin was out, so she left a message saying they were following the Oceanus trail to Quebec and would be in contact. She asked Austin's secretary to track down a telephone number for Throckmorton and to see if she could put together a flight to Mon- treal. Several minutes later, the secretary called back with the phone number and two reservations on a flight leaving later that day.

Gamay called Throckmorton. She said she was a NUMA marine biologist and wondered if he had any time to talk about his work. He was delighted and flattered, he said, and would be free after his last class. Their Air Canada flight landed at Dorval Airport around midafternoon. They dropped their baggage off at the Queen Eliza- beth Hotel and caught a cab to the McGill University campus, a clus- ter of gray granite older buildings along with more modern structures on the side of Mont Royal.

Professor Throckmorton was wrapping up his lecture as the Trouts arrived, and emerged from his classroom surrounded by a flock of chattering students. Throckmorton's eye caught Gamay's stunning red hair and took in Paul's tall figure. He shooed away the students and came over to greet the newcomers.

"The Doctors Trout, I presume," he said, pumping their hands. "Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," Gamay said. "Not at all," he said warmly. "It's an honor to meet scientists from NUMA. I'm flattered that you're interested in my work."

Paul said, "We were traveling in Canada, and when Gamay learned about your research, she insisted that we make a detour."

"Hope I'm not the source of marital discord," he said, bushy eye- brows jumping like startled caterpillars.

"Not at all," Gamay said. "Montreal is one of our favorite cities."

"Well, then, now that we've got that settled, why don't you come up to the lab and see what's on the slab, as they say."

"Didn't they say that in The Rocy Horror Picture ShowY Gamay said.

"Correct! Some of my colleagues have taken to calling me the mad scientist Frank N. Furter."

Throckmorton was ofshorter-than-average height, chubby rather than plump, and the roundness of his body was repeated in his moon- shaped face and his circular eyeglasses. Yet he moved with the quick- ness of an athlete, as he led the way to the lab.

He ushered the Trouts through a door and into a large, brightly lit space and motioned for them to sit down at a lab table. Comput- ers were scattered at stations around the room. Aerators bubbled in a series of tanks on the far side of the lab, and a briny smell of fish filled the room. Throckmorton poured three lab beakers of iced tea and sat down at the table.

"How did you hear about my work?" he said, after a sip from his beaker. "Something in a scientific journal?"

The Trouts exchanged glances. "To be honest," Gamay said, "we don't know what you're working on."

Seeing Throckmorton's puzzled expression, Paul jumped in and said, "We got your name from a fisherman by the name of Mike Neal. He said he had contacted you on behalf of the men in his fleet. Their catches were off, and they thought it might have something to do with an odd type of fish he and the other fishermen in his town were landing."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Neal! His call was directed to my office, but I never talked to him. I was out of the country when he called, and I've been too busy to get back to him. Sounded quite intriguing. Something about a 'devilfish.' Maybe I can give him a call later today."

"I hope you get good long-distance rates," Paul said. "Neal is dead."

"I don't understand." "He was killed in a boat explosion," Gamay said. "The

police don't know what caused it."

A stunned expression crossed Throckmorton's face. "Poor man." He paused, then said, "I hope this doesn't seem callous, but I suppose now I'll never know about this strange devilfish."

"We'll be glad to tell you what we know," Gamay said. Throckmorton listened intently as Gamay and Paul took turns describing their trip with Neal. As each detail unfolded, the cheer- fulness drained from Throckmorton's rosy-cheeked face. He gazed solemnly from Gamay to Paul. "Are you absolutely certain of every- thing you told me? You're quite sure of the size of the fish and the strange white color. And its aggressiveness?"

"See for yourself," Paul said, producing the videotape shot on Neal's boat.

After viewing the tape, Throckmorton rose, solemn-faced, from his chair and paced back and forth, hands clasped behind his back. Over and over, he muttered, "This is not good, not good at all." Gamay had a disarming way of cutting to the chase. "Please tell us what's going on, Professor."

He stopped his pacing and sat down again. "As a marine biologist, you must know about transgenic fish," he said. "The first one was de- veloped practically in your backyard, at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute."

"I've read a number of papers, but I can't say I'm an expert on the subject. From what I understand, genes are spliced into fish eggs to make them grow faster."

"That's right. The genes come from other species, even from in- sects and humans."

"Humans?" "I don't use human genes in my experiments. I agree with the Chinese, who are heavily into biofish research, that using human genes in this manner is unethical."

"How are the genes used?" "They produce unusually high levels of growth hormones and stimulate the fish's appetite. I've been developing transgenic fish with the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans lab in Vancouver. The salmon grown there are fed twenty times a day. The constant feeding is essential. These super-salmon are programmed to grow eight times faster, forty times larger than normal in the first year. You can see what a boon this is for a fish

farmer. He brings a fatter fish to market in a fraction of the time."

"Thus ensuring a larger profit." "To be sure. Those pushing to bring biofish to market call it the

'Blue Revolution.' They admit they'd like to increase profits, but they say they have an altruistic motive as well. DNA-altered fish will pro- vide a cheap and plentiful source of food for the poorer nations of the world."

"I think I heard the same arguments in favor of DNA-modified crops," Gamay said.

"With good reason. Genetically modified fish were a logical out- growth of the biotech food trend. If you can engineer corn, why not do the same for higher living organisms? This is likely to be far more controversial, though. The protests have already started. The oppo- nents say transgenic fish could mess up the environment, wipe out the wild fishery and put the small fisherman out of business. They're call- ing these biotech creations 'Frankenfish.' "

"Catchy name," said Paul, who had been listening with interest to the conversation. "Can't see it selling too many fish." "Where do you stand on this issue?" Gamay said. "Since I created some of these fish, I have a special responsibility. I want to see more study before we start raising these creatures on fish farms. The push to commercialize what we've been doing worries me. We need extensive risk assessment before we trigger what could be a disaster."

"You sound very worried," Gamay said.

"It's what I don't know that concerns me. Things are spinning out of control. Dozens of commercial operations are pushing to bring their own fish to market. More than two dozen fish species are being researched in addition to salmon. The potential is enormous, al- though some fish farmers are turning away from transgenics because of the controversy. But big corporations have been moving in. There are dozens of patents for gene changes in Canada and the U.S."

"An economic and scientific juggernaut like that will be hard to stop once it gets going."

"I feel like King Canute trying to shout down the ocean." The frustration was apparent in his voice. "Billions of dollars are at stake, so the pressure is

enormous. That's why the Canadian government funds transgenic research. The feeling is that if we don't lead the way, others will. We want to be ready when the dam bursts."

"If there is so much pressure and money involved, what's holding back the biofish tide?"

"A potential public relations nightmare. Let me give you an ex- ample. A New Zealand company called King Salmon was develop- ing biofish, but word about two-headed and lump-covered fish leaked out, and the press whipped the public into a frenzy. King had to stop its experiments and destroy everything, because people were worried that these Frankenfish might escape into the wild and start mating with normal ones."

"Is something like that a possibility?" Gamay said.

"Not with contained fish-farming, but I have no doubt that trans- genic fish would escape if they were placed in open-water cages. They are aggressive and hungry. Like a convict who yearns for free- dom, they'd find a way. The government fisheries lab in Vancouver is as tight as Fort Knox. We've got electronic alarms, security guards, double-screened tanks to keep fish from getting away. But a private company might be less cautious."

Gamay nodded. "We've had invasions of foreign species in U.S. waters, with potentially damaging results. The Asian swamp eel has been found in some states-it's a voracious creature that can slither across dry land. Asian carp are in the Mississippi River, and there are worries they can get into Lake Michigan. They grow up to four feet long, and there have been stories of them jumping out of the water and knocking people out of boats, but the real worry is the way they suck up plankton like a vacuum cleaner. Then there's the lion fish, a real cutie. They carry spines that can poison humans, and they com- pete for food with native species."

"You make an excellent point, but the situation with transgenic fish is even more complicated than a competition for food. Some of my colleagues are more worried about the 'Trojan gene' effect. You recall the story of the Trojan horse, naturally."

"The wooden horse filled with Greek soldiers," said Paul. "The Trojans thought it was a gift, brought it inside their city walls-and that was the end of Troy."

"An appropriate analogy in this case," Throckmorton said.

He tapped his finger against the cover of a thick staple-bound re- port that was lying on the table. "This was published by English Na- ture, the group that advises the British government on conservation matters. It contains the results of two studies. As a result of the find- ings, English Nature is opposing release oftransgenic fish unless they are made infertile, and a House of Lords committee wants an out- right ban on GM fish. The first study was done at Purdue Univer- sity, where researchers found that transgenic male fish have a

fourfold advantage in breeding. Larger fish are preferred as mates by females."

"Who says size isn't important?" Paul said, with his usual dry humor.

"It happens to be very important in fish. The researchers looked at the Japanese medaka, whose transgenic offspring were twenty- two percent larger than their siblings. These big males made up

eighty percent of the breeding against twenty percent for the smaller males."

Gamay leaned forward with her brow furrowed. "It would even- tually be a disaster for the wild population."

"Worse than a disaster. More like a catastrophe. If you had one transgenic fish in a population of 100,000, GM fish would become fifty percent of the population within sixteen generations."

"Which isn't long in fish terms," Gamay commented.

Throckmorton nodded. "You can cut that time even further. Com- puter models show that if you introduced sixty DNA-altered fish into a population of sixty thousand, it would take only forty genera- tions to pollute the gene pool to extinction."

"You said there was a second study." Throckmorton rubbed his hands together.

"Oh yes, it gets even better. The researchers at universities in Al- abama and California gave salmon growth-promoter genes to some Channel catfish. They found that these transgenic fish were better at avoiding predators than were their

natural counterparts."

"To put it succinctly, you think one of these superfish might get into the wild, where it would outbreed and outlive the natural species, quickly driving them to extinction."

"That's it." Paul shook his head in disbelief. "Given what you've just told us," he said, "why would any government or company be fooling around with genetic dynamite like this?"

"I understand what you're saying, but in the hands of a profes- sional, dynamite can be extremely useful." Throckmorton rose from his chair. "Come see, Dr. Frankenstein's workbench is right this way."

He led them to the other side of the lab. The fish swimming in the tanks ranged in size from finger-length to a couple of feet long. He stopped in front of one of the larger tanks. A silver-scaled fish with a dark ridge along its spine was swimming slowly from one end of the tank to the other.

"Well, what do you think of our latest genetically modified mon- ster?"

Gamay leaned close so that her nose was inches from the glass. "Looks like any other well-fed salmon you might see swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. Maybe a little more girth around the middle than normal."

"Appearances can be deceiving. How old would you say this hand- some fellow is?"

"I'd guess it's about a year old."

"Actually, only a few weeks ago, it was a mere egg."

"Impossible." "I would agree with you if I hadn't played midwife at its birth. What you're looking at is an eating machine. We've managed to soup up its metabolism. If that creature were placed in the wild, it would quickly out-eat the native stocks. Its little brain shouts one message over and over. 'Feed me, I'm hungry!' Watch."

Throckmorton opened a cooler, extracted a bucket of small bait fish and threw a handful into the tank. The salmon pounced on the fish, and within moments it

had devoured its meal. Then it devoured the floating shreds.

"I practically grew up on a fishing boat," Paul said with wide eyes. "I've seen shark go for a hooked cod and schools of blues drive bait fish onto the beach, but I've never come across anything like this. Are you sure you didn't insert some piranha genes into your little baby?"

"Nothing that complicated, although we did some physical engi- neering as well. Salmon have weak, brittle teeth, so we gave this model sharper, more durable dentures that allow it to eat more quickly."

"Amazing," Gamay said, equally impressed by the display. "This fish was only slightly modified. We've built some real mon- sters, true Frankenfish. We destroyed them immediately so that there was no chance they might escape into the wild. We found that we could control size, but I started to worry when I saw how aggressive our creations were, even though they looked fairly normal."

Gamay said, "The fish we caught was aggressive and abnormal in size.

The worried look came back onto Throckmorton's face. "There's only one conclusion I can draw. Your devilfish was a mutant created in a lab. Someone is doing research that has gotten out of control. In- stead of destroying their mutants, they've allowed them into the wild. It's a shame the fish you caught was destroyed. I can only hope that it was sterile."

"What would happen if genetically engineered fish like the one we may have seen start to propagate?"

"A biotech fish is basically an alien species. It's no different than an exotic life- form brought in from Mars and introduced into our en- vironment. I see environmental and economic damage on an un- precedented scale. They could destroy whole fishing fleets, causing huge economic hardship, like that experienced by Mr. Neal and his fellow fishermen. It would totally upset the balance of nature in the waters along our coasts, where the most productive areas are. I have no idea what the long-term consequences would be."

"Let me play devil's advocate," Gamay said after some thought. "Suppose these so-called superfish did supplant the natural popula- tion. The commercial fishermen would in effect become the preda- tors who keep the population within reasonable limits. You would still have fish that could be harvested and

sold at market. They would just be bigger and meatier."

"And meaner," Paul noted. "There are too many unknowns to take the risk," Throckmorton

said. "In Norway, hybrid salmon escaped into the sea and bred suc- cessfully with the native fish, but were less able to survive in the wild. So you could have a case where the superfish that replaces the wild stock dies out as a species, eliminating itself as well as the natural pop- ulation."

A sardonic voice said, "My dear Throckmorton, are you trying to frighten these poor people with your dire warnings?"

A man wearing a lab coat had quietly slipped into the lab and was observing them, a wide smile on his face. "Frederick!" Professor Throckmorton said, beaming. Turning to the Trouts, he said, "This is my esteemed colleague, Dr. Barker. Frederick, these are the Doc- tors Trout from NUMA." In an audible aside, Throckmorton said, They may call me Frankenstein, but this is Dr. Strangelove."

Both men laughed over the shared joke. Barker came over and shook hands. He was in his early fifties, with an imposing physique, a shaved head and sunglasses that hid his eyes. His skin had a bleached-out look to it.

"It's a great pleasure to meet someone from NUMA. Please don't let Throckmorton frighten you. You'll never eat a salmon amandine again after listening to him. What brings you to McGill?"

"We were on vacation and heard about Dr. Throckmorton's work/' Gamay said. "As a marine biologist, I thought there might be something in it NUMA would be interested in."

"A busman's holiday! Well, let me defend myself against this slan- der. I am a strong proponent oftransgenic fish, which makes me sus- pect in the eyes of my friend here."

"The doctor is more than a proponent. He is affiliated with some of the biotech companies that are pushing to bring these creatures to market."

"You make it sound like a dark conspiracy, Throckmorton. My friend forgets to

tell you that I am working with the full complicity and financial support of the Canadian government."

"Dr. Barker would like to create a designer salmon, so that peo- ple could have a different flavor every day of the week."

"That's not a bad idea, Throckmorton. Do you mind if I bor- row it.

"Only if you claim full responsibility for creating such a monster."

"The professor worries too much." He gestured toward the fish tank. "That fine fellow is proof there is no need to create a transgenic fish of monstrous size. And as he said, biotech fish are less able to sur- vive in the wild. It's easy enough to sterilize the fish so they won't replicate themselves."

"Yes, but sterilization techniques are less than one hundred per- cent reliable. You might not be so casual after you hear the news that the Trouts have brought me."

Throckmorton asked the Trouts to tell their story and run the video again. When they were finished, he said, "What do you make of it, Frederick?"

Barker shook his head. "I'm afraid I share some blame. I got the message from Neal when he called. But I never called him back."

"And what do you think?"

Barker's smile had disappeared. "I would say that it was impossi- ble, if it had not been witnessed by two qualified observers and video- taped. This has all the earmarks of a transgenic experiment gone wrong."

"Who would be so irresponsible as to let a fish like this escape into the wild? Apparently, there are others, if we are to believe the fish- ermen. We must get someone in the field immediately."

"I agree wholeheartedly. It's evident that this white devilfish is al- ready competing with the wild species for food. Whether it can pass along its genes is another question."

"That's what has bothered me all along about this whole issue, its

unpredictability," Throckmorton said.

Barker glanced at his watch. "What is not unpredictable is my next class, which meets in a few minutes." He bowed slightly and shook hands with Paul and Gamay. "I'm sorry that I have to run. A pleasure meeting you."

"Your colleague is fascinating," Gamay said. "He looks more like a professional wrestler than a geneticist."

"Oh yes, Frederick is one of a kind. The female students love him.

He rides a motorcycle around the city, which they think is very cool."

"Is there something wrong with his eyes?"

"You noticed the sunglasses, of course. Frederick tends toward al- binism. As you can see from his lack of complexion, he avoids the sun, and his eyes are very sensitive to light. His handicap hasn't hindered his accomplishments, though. Everything I said about his brilliance is true, though, unlike me, he is putting his expertise to work in the private sector. He'll probably become a millionaire. Anyway, we must both thank you for alerting us. I'll start immediately to put a field team together/'

"We've taken enough of your time/' Gamay said. "Not at all. It's been a treat to talk to you. I hope we'll meet again." Throckmorton asked if he could copy the video. Minutes later Paul and Gamay were in a cab headed down the hill to the hotel. "Interesting afternoon/' Paul said.

"More so than you think. While Throckmorton and I were copy- ing the tape, I asked him who Barker's employers were. I thought it wouldn't hurt to have another lead to chase down. He said the com- pany was named Aurora."

"Pretty name," Paul said with a yawn. "What did he say about it?" Gamay smiled mysteriously. "He said Aurora is a subsidiary of a larger company."

Paul blinked. "Don't tell me-" She nodded. "Oceanus."

He thought about it for a moment, then said, "I tried to look at this as if I were creating a computer graphic, but the problem is more like a kid's picture puzzle. Barker is one dot, the guys who tried to drive us off the road are another dot. If

we connect the two, we can start to sketch out a picture. So our course of action is very clear." "And what might that be?" Gamay said with skepticism. Paul gave her a lopsided grin. "We have to come up with more dots."

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THE LOCATION RYAN had suggested for a rendezvous was

only a few minutes from NUMA headquarters. Austin drove along the George Washington Parkway to a sign that said THEODORE ROOSEVELT ISLAND. He parked his car, walked over the footbridge that spanned a narrow waterway called Little River and followed a path to the Roosevelt Memorial, a wide plaza edged by low benches. Ryan was standing with his back to the bronze statue of the president, apparently keeping an eye out for Austin.

Ryan waved him over. "Thanks for coming, Kurt." Ryan turned and gazed up at the statue. TR stood with legs wide apart, fist raised high in the air. "01' Teddy up there got me into this crazy business. He put millions of acres under federal protection, saved endangered birds from the plume hunters and made the Grand Canyon a national park. He wasn't afraid to push the law to its lim- its when he thought he was acting in the public good. Whenever I have doubts about what I'm doing, I think of this guy staring down the fat cats."

Austin couldn't help feeling that Ryan was posing for a photo op. "It's hard to believe you have doubts about anything, Marcus."

"Oh I do, believe me. Especially when I think of the task I've carved out for myself: Protecting the world's oceans and the critters that live in them."

"If I recall my mythology, the sea-god position has been filled for the last few thousand years."

Ryan smirked like a guilty child. "Yeah, I guess I do sound god- like at times. But mythology also tells us that gods commonly appoint themselves to their positions."

"I'll remember that if I ever lose my job at NUMA. Therri said you wanted to talk to me about something important."

"Yes," Ryan said, looking past Austin's shoulder. "There she is now, as a matter

of fact."

Therri was walking across the plaza with a young man Austin guessed to be in his early twenties. He had reddish-brown skin, a broad face and high cheekbones.

"Good to see you again, Kurt," Therri said, extending her hand. Her manner was businesslike in front of the other men, but her eyes told Austin she hadn't forgotten the goodnight kiss in Copenhagen; or at least that's what he hoped they said. "This is Ben Nighthawk. Ben is a research assistant in our office."

Ryan suggested that they move off to the side of the memorial. When he was sure they could talk out of the earshot of any wander- ing tourists, he wasted no time. "Ben has uncovered some important information on Oceanus," he said.

With a nod from Ryan, the young Indian began to tell his story.

"I come from a tiny village in northern Canada. It's pretty remote, on a big lake, and usually it's pretty quiet up there. A few months ago, my mother wrote me a letter saying someone had bought a huge tract of land across the lake from the village. Big corporation, she thought. I hope to work against overdevelopment of the Canadian wilds when I get out of college, so I got really interested when she said they were building night and day on the lake. Helicopters and float- planes were coming in at all hours. I asked my mother to keep me up to date, and the last time I heard from her was more than two weeks ago. She was really worried." "About what?" Austin said.

"She didn't say, only that it had something to do with the stuff going on across the lake. So I got worried and went home to take a look-and my family was gone."

"You're saying they disappeared?" Austin said. Nighthawk nodded. "Everyone in the village had vanished." "Canada's a big place, Ben. Where was your village located?" Nighthawk glanced at Ryan. "In good time, Kurt," Ryan said.

"Tell Mr. Austin what happened next, Ben."

"I went looking for my family," Nighthawk continued. "I found them being kept prisoner on the other side of the lake. Guys with guns were forcing the men from my village to work, clearing land around a big building."

"Do you know who they were?"

"I never saw them before. They were dressed in black uniforms." He looked at Ryan for encouragement, then went on. "It's crazy, but when we got there-"

"We?" Ryan said, "Josh Green, my next in command, went along with

Ben. Don't be afraid to tell Mr. Austin everything you saw, no mat- ter how wild it seems."

Nighthawk shrugged. "Okay, then. When we first got there, we didn't see anything but forest, except for where they were clearing. Then this huge building suddenly appeared out of nowhere." He paused, waiting for Austin to reply with disbelieving laughter.

Austin kept his blue-green eyes leveled. "Go on," he said, his face impassive.

"That's it. Instead of trees, we were looking at a giant dome. Josh and I thought it looked like an Eskimo igloo, only hundreds of times bigger. While we were watching, the top of the thing opened like this." He cupped his hands to form an open clamshell. "Turned out it was a hangar for a blimp."

Austin said, "Something like the Goodyear blimp?" Nighthawk screwed up his mouth in thought. "Naw. Bigger and longer. More like a rocket ship. It even had a name on the fin. Niet- zsche.)

"Like the German philosopher?"

"I guess so," Ben said. "We saw the thing land in the hangar, and the roof closed again, and then a bunch of guys came out the front door. My cousin was in a work gang, and he tried to run for it, and one of those bastards killed him." Nighthawk's voice became choked with emotion.

Ryan put his hand on Nighthawk's shoulder. "That's enough for now, Ben."

Austin said, "I'd like to help. But I'm going to need more details."

Ryan said, "We'll be glad to fill you in, but the information comes with a price."

Austin raised an eyebrow. "I'm a little short of change today, Marcus."

"We're not interested in money. We want SOS and NUMA to work together to bring Oceanus down. We share the information. You include us in any mission."

Austin showed his teeth in a wide grin. "You'd be better off call- ing in the marines, Ryan. NUMA is a scientific organization dedi- cated to gathering knowledge. It's not a military organization."

"C'mon, Kurt, you're being disingenuous," Ryan said, with a knowing smile. "We researched your job at NUMA. This Special As- signments Team you run has come up against some pretty hard cases. You didn't stop the bad guys by whacking them over the head with a scientific treatise."

"You flatter me, Marcus. I don't have the power to authorize a joint mission. I'd have to run it by higher-ups."

Ryan took the answer as a qualified yes. "I new you'd come around," he said triumphantly. "Thank you so much."

"Save your thanks. I have no intention of going to the head hon- chos."

"Why not?" "NUMA would be putting its reputation on the line if it worked with a fringe organization like SOS. On the other hand, you'd gain public support for the Sentinels by putting them under NUMA's um- brella of legitimacy. Sorry. It's a one-sided deal."

Ryan brushed back his hair. "We haven't told you everything, Kurt. I have a personal stake in this, as well. It wasn't just Ben's cousin-Josh Green was killed."

"It was my fault," Ben said. "I ran into the open, and he tried to stop me. They shot him."

"You did what anyone would have done in your place," Ryan said.

Josh was a brave man." "You're talking about two murders now," Austin said. "Have you reported them to the police?"

"No. We want to deal with this ourselves. And there's something olse that may persuade you to change your mind. We tracked down Ae new owner of the land

around Ben's lake. It was a real estate straw corporation... set up by Oceanus."

"You're sure of that?" "Positive. Are you with us now?"

Austin shook his head. "Before you buckle on your six-shooters and ride off, let me remind you what you're up against. Oceanus has money, and worldwide connections, and as you've seen, they don't hesitate to commit cold-blooded murder. They'd swat you and any- one you brought in from SOS like a fly. I'm sorry about Ben's cousin and your friend getting killed, but it only proves what I've been say- ing. You'll be putting your people in similar danger." He glanced pointedly at Therri.

"They're willing to take any risk for the environment," Ryan said. "Apparently, NUMA doesn't give a damn about it."

"Hold on, Marcus," Therri said. She had seen Austin's jaw harden. "Kurt has a point. Maybe we could offer a compromise. SOS could work behind the scenes with NUMA."

"Spoken like a true lawyer," Austin said.

Therri hadn't expected Austin's quick rebuff. "What's that sup- posed to mean?" she said, a hint of coldness creeping into her voice.

"I think this is less about the whales and the walruses and dead friends, and more about your friend's ego." He turned back to Ryan. "You're still ticked off about the loss of the Sea Sentinel. She was your pride and joy. You were going to play the martyr in front of the cable news cameras, but the Danes beat you to the punch when they dropped the charges and quietly kicked you out of their country."

"That's not true," Therri said. "Marcus is-"

Ryan silenced her with a wave of his hand. "Don't waste your breath. It's apparent that Kurt is a fair-weather friend."

"Better than no friend at all," Austin said. He pointed toward the statue of Roosevelt. "Maybe you should go back and read that guy s resume again. He didn't ask others to stick their necks out. Sorry to hear about your cousin, Ben, and about Josh Green. Nice to see you again, Therri."

Austin had had his fill ofRyan's self-aggrandizement. He'd been hopeful when he heard Nighthawk's story, but angry at Ryan for slamming the door on a possible lead. He was striding down the path when he heard footsteps from behind. Therri had followed him from the memorial. She caught up with him and grabbed him lightly by the arm. "Kurt, please reconsider. Marcus really needs your help."

"I can see that. But I can't agree to his conditions."

"We can work something out," she pleaded.

"If you and Ben want help from NUMA, you'll have to cut loose from Ryan."

"I can't do that," she said, bringing the power other lovely eyes to bear.

"I think you can," Austin said, boring back with his own, equally intense gaze.

"Damnit, Austin," she said with exasperation, "you're one stub- born bastard."

Austin chuckled. "Does that mean you won't go out to dinner with me?"

Therri's face darkened with anger, and she spun on her heel and strode off along the path. Austin watched her until she disappeared around a curve. He shook his head. The sacrifices I make for NUMA, he thought. He started off toward the parking lot, only to stop short a minute later when a figure popped out of the woods. It was Ben Nighthawk.

"I made an excuse to get away," Nighthawk said breathlessly. "I told Marcus I had to use the rest room. I had to talk to you. I don't blame you for not wanting to hook up with SOS. Marcus has let all Ac publicity go to his head. He thinks he's Wyatt Earp. But I saw those guys kill my cousin and Josh. I tried to tell him what he's up against, but he won't listen. If SOS goes in, my family is dead meat." "Tell me where they are and I'll do what I can." "It's tough to explain. I'll have to draw you a map. Oh, hell-" Ryan was striding up the path toward them, an angry expression on his handsome face. "Call me," Austin said.

Ben nodded and walked back to meet Ryan. They became en- gaged in what looked like a heated discussion. Then Ryan put his arm around Ben and guided him back to the memorial. He turned back once, to glare at Austin, who shrugged off the evil eye and headed back to his car.

Twenty minutes later, Austin strolled into the Air and Space Museum on Independence Avenue. He took the elevator to the third floor, and was headed toward the library, when he encountered a middle-aged man in a wrinkled tan suit who had stepped out of a side room.

"Kurt Austin, as I live and breathe!" the man said.

"I wondered if I'd bump into you, Mac."

"Always a good chance of that around here. I practically live within these walls. How's the pride ofNUMA these days?"

"Fine. How's the Smithsonian's answer to St. Julien Perlmutter?"

MacDougal chortled at the question. Tall and lean, with fine sandy hair and a hawk-nose that dominated his narrow face, he was the physical antithesis of the portly Perlmutter. But what he lacked in girth he made up for with an encyclopedic knowledge of air history that was every bit the equivalent of Perlmutter's grasp of the sea.

"St. Julien carries much more, um, weight in the historical world than I do," he said, with a twinkle in his gray eyes. "What brings you into the rarified atmosphere of the Archives Division?"

'I'm doing some research on an old airship. I was hoping I'd find something in the library."

"No need to go to the archives. I'm on my way to a meeting, but we can talk on the way." Austin said. "Have you ever come across a mention of an airship called the Nietzsche?"

"Oh, sure. Only one airship had that name-the one that was lost on the secret polar expedition of 1935."

"You know it, then?" He nodded. "There were rumors that the Germans had sent an airship to the North Pole on a secret mission. If it had succeeded, it was meant to cow the Allies and tout the glories of German Kultur in the propaganda war. The Germans denied it, but they couldn't ex- plain the disappearance of two of their greatest airship pioneers, Heinrich Braun and Herman Lutz. The war came

along, and the sto- ries faded."

"So that was it?" "Oh no. After the war, papers were discovered that suggested strongly that the flight had indeed taken place, with an airship sim- ilar to the Graf Zeppelin. The airship supposedly sent a radio message as it neared the pole. They had discovered something of interest on the ice."

"They didn't say what?" "No. And some people believe it was a fabrication, anyhow. Maybe something Josef Goebbels made up."

"Butyo believe the accounts." "It's entirely possible. Certainly the technology was there."

"What could have happened to the airship?" "There are all sorts of possibilities. Engine failure. Sudden storm. Ice. Human error. The Graf Zeppelin was a highly successful aircraft, but we're talking about operating in extreme conditions. Other air- ships have come to similar fates. It could have crashed into the pack ice, been carried hundreds of miles away and gone into the sea when the ice melted." His face lit up. "Don't tell me! You've found traces of it at the bottom of the sea?"

"Unfortunately, no. Someone mentioned it to me... and, well, my scientific curiosity got the better of me."

"I know exactly what you mean." He stopped in front of a door. "Here's my meeting. Come by again and we'll talk some more." "I will. Thanks for your help."

Austin was glad that Mac wasn't pressing him further. He didn't like being evasive with old friends.

MacDougal paused with his hand on the doorknob. "The fact that we're talking about the Arctic is a funny coincidence. There's a big reception tonight to open a new exhibition on Eskimo culture and art.

'People of the Frozen North,' or something like that. Dogsled races, the whole thing."

"Dogsled races in Washington?"

"I said the same thing, but apparently it's so. Why don't you come by and see for yourself? "

"I may just do that."

As he was leaving the museum, Austin stopped at the information booth and picked up a brochure for the exhibition, which was in fact called Denizens of the Frozen North. The opening night reception was by invitation only. He ran his eye down the brochure and stopped at the name of the sponsor: Oceanus.

He tucked the brochure in his pocket and drove back to his office. A few calls later, he had wrangled an invitation, and, after working awhile longer on his report to Gunn, he went home to change. As he walked past the bookshelves in his combined living room-library, he ran his fingers along the spines of the neatly shelved volumes. The voices of Aristotle, Dante and Locke seemed to speak to him.

Austin's fascination with the great philosophers went back to his college days and the influence of a thought-provoking professor. Later, philosophy provided a distraction from his work and helped shed light on the darker elements of the human soul. In the course of his assignments, Austin had killed men and injured others. His sense of duty, justice and self-preservation had shielded him from crippling, and perhaps dangerous, self-doubt. But Austin was not a callous man, and philosophy gave him a moral compass to follow when he examined the rightness of his actions.

He extracted a thick volume, flicked on the stereo so that the liq- uid notes flowed from John Coltrane's saxophone, then went out on the deck and settled into a chair. Riffling through the pages, he quickly found the quote he'd been thinking about since MacDougal had mentioned a blimp named Nietzsche.

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you lool into an abyss, the abyss also loofs into you.

He stared off into space for a few moments, wondering if he had seen the abyss, or more important, whether it was looking back at him. Then he closed the book, put it back on the shelf and went to get ready for the reception.

A HUGE BANNER EMBLAZONED with the words Denizens of the Frozen North was draped over the Mall entrance to the National Museum of Natural History. Painted on the banner, so there would be no mistaking the subject of the show, were figures in hooded fur parkas riding dogsleds across a forbidding Arctic land- scape. Mountainous hulking icebergs loomed in the background.

Austin walked between the portico columns and stepped into the museum's expansive octagonal rotunda. At the center of the eighty- foot-wide space was a masterpiece of taxidermy, an African elephant charging across an imaginary savanna. The twelve-ton animal dwarfed the petite decent standing under its upraised trunk.

"Good evening," the young woman said with a smile, handing Austin a program. She was wearing a lightweight facsimile of tradi- tional Eskimo dress. "Welcome to the Denizens of the Frozen North exhibition. Go through that door and you'll see the displays in the special exhibition hall. A movie on Eskimo culture will be showing every twenty minutes in the I max Theater. The sled dog and harpoon competitions will be held on the Mall in about fifteen minutes.

Should be quite exciting!"

Austin thanked the guide and trailed the guests into the special ex- hibit area. The well-lit display cases were filled with Eskimo art- work and ivory carvings, tools for hunting and fishing, cleverly fashioned skin suits and boots that would keep their owners warm and dry in the coldest of Arctic temperatures, driftwood sleds, canoes and whaleboats. A doleful chant backed by the beat of a tom-tom came from speakers scattered around the hall.

The chattering crowd was the usual combination of Washington politicians, bureaucrats and press. For all its importance in the world, Washington was still a small town, and Austin recognized a number of familiar faces. He was talking to a historian from the Navy Mu- seum who was a kayak enthusiast, when he heard his name called. Angus MacDougal from the Air and Space Museum was making his way through the milling guests. He took Austin's arm.

"Come over here, Kurt, there's someone I want you to meet." He led Austin to a dignified-looking gray-haired man and intro- duced him as Charles Gleason, the curator of the exhibition.

"I told Chuck that you were interested in Eskimos," MacDougal said.

"Actually, they prefer to be called 'Inuit; which means, 'the Peo- ple,' " Gleason said. " 'Eskimo was a name the Indians gave them. It means 'eaters of raw flesh.' Their name for themselves is 'Nakooruk; which means 'good.' " He smiled. "Sorry for the lec- ture. I taught college for many years, and the pedagogue in me keeps reasserting itself."

"No apology necessary," Austin said. "I never resist the opportu- nity to learn something new."

"That's very kind of you. Do you have any questions on the exhi- bition?"

"I was wondering about the sponsor," Austin said. He read the placard stating that items in the case were on loan from Oceanus, and he decided to take a long shot. "I've heard the head of Oceanus is a man named Toonook."

Toonook?

"That's right."

Gleason gave him a wary look. "You're serious?"

"Very. I'd like to meet the gentleman."

Gleason replied with a strange half smile and made a sound be- tween a chortle and a snicker. Unable to contain himself, he burst forth with a loud guffaw. "Sorry," he said, "but I'd hardly call Toonook a gentleman. Toonook is the Inuit name of an evil spirit. He's considered to be the creator and destroyer."

"You're saying Toonook is a mythological name?"

"That's right. The Inuit say he's in the sea, the earth and the air. Every time there's an unexpected noise, like the ice cracking under- foot, it's Toonook, looking for a victim. When the wind howls like a pack of hungry wolves, it's Toonook."

Austin was confused. Toonook was the name Therri had given him as the head of Oceanus. "I can see why my question made you laugh," Austin said, with an embarrassed smile. "I must have mis- understood."

"There's no misunderstanding as far as the Inuit are concerned," Gleason said. "When they travel alone, they keep an eye out for Toonook. They carry a bone knife and wave it around to keep Toonook at bay."

Austin's eye drifted past Gleason's shoulder. "Something like the little pig sticker in that display case?"

Gleason tapped the glass in front of the ornately carved white blade. "That's a very rare and unusual item."

"In what way?" "Most Inuit knives were tools mainly used for skinning. That

knife was made with one purpose: to kill other human beings." "Odd," Austin said, "I had always heard that the Eskimos were a peaceful and good-natured people."

"Very true. They live in close quarters in a harsh and demanding environment where tempers could easily flare into violence. They know cooperation is vital to survival, and so they've evolved a whole set of rituals and customs to diffuse aggression." "That knife looks about as aggressive as it gets." Gleason nodded in agreement. "The Inuit are subject to the same dark passions as the rest of humankind. The people who made that weapon were from a tribe that broke the peaceful mold. We think they came from Siberia in prehistoric times and settled in northern Quebec. They tended toward rape, pillage, human sacrifice... very nasty. The other communities banded together many years ago and drove them off. They named them 'Kiolya.' "

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"It's the Inuit name for the aurora borealis, which the Arctic peo- ple regard as the manifestation of evil. The real name of the tribe, no one knows."

"What happened to the Kiolya?"

"They scattered around Canada. Many of them ended up in the cities, where their descendants formed criminal enterprises. Murder for hire and extortion, mainly. Some of them retained their old tribal customs, such as the vertical tattoos over the cheekbones, until they found that it identified them easily to the police."

"I'm curious. How is an exhibition like this pulled together?"

"In many different ways. With this one, a public relations firm from Oceanus approached the museum and asked if we would be in- terested in placing the show. They said the sponsors had a strong in- terest in educating the public on Inuit culture, and they would organize the exhibition and pay all costs. Well, we couldn't resist. It's a fascinating show, don't you think?"

Austin stared at the Kiolya knife, which was identical to the weapon that had slashed his chest open at the Faroe Islands fish farm. He was thinking about the vertical tattoos on the face of the man who'd wielded the knife. "Yes, fascinating," he said.

"Since I can't introduce you to Toonook, perhaps you'd like to meet the representative from Oceanus."

"He's here?"

"I just spoke to him a few minutes ago in the diorama room. Fol- low me."

The lights in the diorama room had been dimmed to simulate the Arctic night. Lasers projected a moving display of the northern lights on the ceiling. Standing alone in front of a life-sized diorama show- ing a seal hunt was a tall, well-built man with a shaved head. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes.

Gleason approached the man and said, "Dr. Barker, I'd like you to meet Kurt Austin. Mr. Austin is with the National Underwater and Marine Agency. You must know of it."

"I would have to come from another planet not to know NUMA."

They shook hands. Austin felt like his fingers were clutching a frozen side of beef.

"I hope you don't mind if I share our little joke," Gleason said to Kurt. "Mr. Austin thought that the head of Oceanus was named Toonook."

"Mr. Gleason explained that Toonook was not a man, but an evil spirit," Austin said.

Barker stared at Austin through the dark lenses. "It's more com- plicated than

that," he said. "Toonook is considered to be evil in the Inuit culture. He is the embodiment of that clever light display on the ceiling. But like others through history, the people of the North wor- shipped the thing they feared the most."

"Toonook is a god, then?"

"Sometimes. But I assure you that the head of Oceanus is very human."

"I stand corrected. If it's not Toonook, what is his real name?"

"He prefers to keep his identity a secret. If you'd like to call him Toonook, feel free to do so. He has been called worse names by his competitors. He stays out of the limelight, and it falls upon his em- ployees to represent him. In my case, I work for a company named Aurora, which is a subsidiary of Oceanus."

"What sort of work do you do for Aurora?"

"I'm a geneticist." Austin glanced around the room. "This is a wide departure from genetics."

"I like to get out of the lab. I suggested that Oceanus sponsor this exhibition. I have a direct interest in the Kiolya. My great-great- grandfather was a New England whaling captain. He stayed with the tribe and tried to stop the walrus hunting that led to its dissolution." "Mr. Gleason tells me that the other Eskimos ran the Kiolya off because they were thieves and murderers."

"They did what they had to do to survive," Barker said. "I'd love to continue this discussion," Gleason said, "but you'll

have to excuse me. I see an assistant who needs my attention. Please give me a call sometime, and we can talk at length, Mr. Austin." When Gleason was gone, Austin said, "Tell me, Dr. Barker, what part of business is Oceanus involved in that would require the serv- ices of a geneticist?"

The frozen smile disappeared. "Come on, Austin. We're alone, so we don't need to play games, anymore. You know very well what Oceanus does. You broke into our Faroe Islands operation, caused a lot of damage and killed one of my men. I won't forget it."

"Gee," Austin said. "Now you've got me confused. You've obvi- ously mistaken

me for someone else."

"I don't think so. The Danish press published your picture every- where. You're quite the hero in Denmark, you know, for rescuing their sailors after that collision."

"A collision which your company engineered," Austin said, drop- ping all pretense.

"And which would have worked, except for your meddling." The soft, cultivated voice had become a snarl. "Well, that ends now. You've interfered in my business for the last time."

"Your business? I thought you were a humble employee for Oceanus, Dr. Barker... or should I call you Toonook?"

Barker removed his glasses and stared at Austin with pale-gray eyes. The moving colors played across his ashen features as if pro- jected on a screen. "Who I am is not important. What I am has a di- rect bearing on your future. I am the instrument of your death. Turn around."

Austin glanced over his shoulder. Two swarthy men stood behind him, blocking the way. They had closed the door to keep the other guests out. Austin wondered which would offer him the better chance, pushing Barker through the display glass or bulling his way between the men at the door. He had already decided he didn't like either option and was groping for a third, when there was a knock at the door and MacDougal stuck his head in.

"Hey, Kurt," he called out. "I'm looking for Charlie Gleason. Sorry to interrupt you."

"Not at all," Austin said. MacDougal wasn't the Seventh Cavalry, but he would do.

The guards looked for direction to Barker. He replaced his sun- glasses, gave Austin his glacial smile and said, " 'Til we meet again," and made for the door. The guards stepped aside to let him through, and a second later, all three men were lost in the crowd.

Austin's reunion with MacDougal didn't last long. As they merged with the crowd, Mac spotted a senator who was a friend of the Smith- sonian, and he dashed off to collar him for funding. Austin mingled with the other guests until he heard an announcement saying that the dogsled races were about to begin. He was heading back to the ro- tunda when he caught a glimpse of chestnut hair cascading to bare shoulders. Therri must have felt his attention. She turned and glared in his direction. Then she smiled.

"Kurt, what a nice surprise," she said. As they shook hands, she eyed him from head to toe. "You look quite handsome in your tuxedo."

Austin hadn't expected the friendly greeting after the acrimony of their parting exchange on Roosevelt Island. "Thanks," he said. "Hope it doesn't smell too strongly of mothballs."

She adjusted one of his lapels as if she were his prom date. "You smell quite nice, as a matter of fact."

"The same thing that attracted you. I'm sure it didn't escape your attention that these displays are the property of Oceanus."

"That's the main reason we're here." Therri glanced off to the side of the rotunda, where Ben Nighthawk stood. He looked uneasy in his black tuxedo, unsure of what to do with his hands, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. She waved him over.

"You remember Ben," Therri said.

'Good to see you again," Austin said, shaking hands. "Nice tux." 'Thanks," Nighthawk said, without enthusiasm. "It's rented." He glanced around at the other guests. "I'm a little out of my element." "Don't worry," Austin said. "Most of the people who come to these receptions are here for the food and the gossip."

"Ben agreed to escort me," Therri said. "Marcus thought Ben's memory might be jogged by something he saw." "Has it been?"

"Not yet," Therri said. "What about you? Have you learned any- thing?"

"Yes," he said with a tight smile. "I've learned that you don't lis- ten to warnings of possible danger."

"That's ancient history," Therri said, like someone trying to be patient with an annoying child. Austin took in the challenging gaze and decided he was wasting his breath trying to change her mind.

"I'm on my way outside to see the dogsled races," he said. "Would you like to join me?"

"Thank you," she said, hooking her arm in Nighthawk's. "We were headed that way ourselves."

A guide directed them outside. Traffic on Madison Drive had been stopped to allow spectators to cross to the National Mall. It was a beautiful night. Lit by floodlights, the red sandstone turrets of the Smithsonian Castle were clearly visible across the eight-hundred- foot width of greensward. Toward the Potomac, the plain white spike of the Washington Monument soared into the night sky.

A large section of open grass had been marked off with yellow po- lice tape and was brightly illuminated by portable lights. Inside the enclosure, orange pylons were arranged in a rectangle. Hundreds of reception guests in evening attire, and passersby attracted by the lights and crowd, ringed the perimeter. A few National Park Service uniforms could be seen. From the other side of the racecourse, where several trucks were lined up, came a sound like a kennel at feeding time. Then the excited yelps and barks were drowned out by a male voice on the public address system.

"Welcome to the Denizens of the Frozen North exhibition, ladies and gentlemen," the announcer said. "You're about to see the most exciting part of

the show, the dogsled competition. This is more than a race. The contestants, from two different Inuit communities in Canada, will demonstrate the skills needed to survive in the Arctic. The hunter must speed to the kill and use his harpoon with unerr- ing accuracy. As you know, we don't have much snowfall in Wash- ington this time of year." He paused, to allow for the laughter. "So the racers will have wheels on their sleds instead "of runners. Enjoy the show!"

Figures milled around the trucks, then broke into two groups,

each pushing a sled toward an opening in the taped enclosure. The sleds, one bright blue, the other fire-engine red, were brought to the starting point and placed side by side. The wolflike sled dogs were taken from the kennel trailers and hooked into their harnesses.

Excited by the prospect of a run, the huskies grew more agitated. The barking reached a crescendo as the impatient dogs pulled against their harnesses. The nine-dog teams, with eight in pairs and one as leader, exerted an amazing amount of muscle power when harnessed together. Even with the brakes set and handlers holding on, the sleds inched forward.

Two men, the drivers obviously, detached themselves from the others and climbed onto their sleds. A second later, the starting gun went off. The drivers shouted commands, the dogs dug their paws in, and the sleds took off like twin rockets. The dogs immediately went into an all-out run. Unsure of the conditions on the grassy course, the drivers slowed slightly as they came into the first turn. There was some skidding, but the sleds came out of the turn side by side and stayed neck and neck into the second curve, successfully navigating it.

The sleds were moving at full tilt again as they raced toward the spot where Austin stood behind the yellow tape, next to Them and Ben. The drivers urged the dogs on with loud kissing sounds. In def- erence to the mild evening, the drivers were not dressed in hooded fur parkas, instead wearing skin pants tucked into their boots. Sweat glistened on their bare chests.

The sleds were modified tube steel rigs like those used to train dogs when there is no snow for the runners to glide upon. Steel mesh platforms about six feet long and more than a yard wide nestled be- tween four rubber airplane tires. The sleds were steered by a small wheel at the top of a vertical tube frame. The drivers stood with feet placed on narrow side extensions that flanked the main

platform, bodies hunched over the steering posts to cut wind resistance and lower the center of gravity. As the sleds flashed by with whirring wheels, the faces of the drivers were only a blur.

The racers were still abreast as they came into the third turn. The red one was on the inside. Looking for a gain, the driver tried to cut the turn tightly. But the sled caught an edge, and the wheels on the other side lifted off the ground a few inches. The driver skillfully compensated with the weight of his body and a touch of the brake, and the wheels slammed down again. The blue-sled driver took ad- vantage of the lost gamble. He could have gone wide, but he finessed the turn with admirable skill and gained a quarter of a length in the straightaway.

The crowd was cheering madly, and it went wild when the blue sled increased the lead to half a length. Another few feet and the blue sled would be able to pull over in front of the red one, blocking the way and controlling the race. The blue driver kept glancing over his shoulder, looking for an opportunity. He got his chance in the fourth and last curve.

The leading sled, on the outside, came into the turn at a perfect speed and angle to put him completely ahead of the other racer. But the red sled suddenly veered to the right, and its front wheel caught the leader's rear-left tire. The blue sled fishtailed from the impact, and the driver fought to bring it under control. The dogs sensed the whiplash about to take place and tried to compensate by pulling harder, but the centrifugal forces acting on the light vehicle proved too potent.

The blue sled went up on two wheels and flipped. The driver went airborne, like a circus performer shot out of a cannon. He hit the grass hard, rolled several times and lay still. The dogs kept run- ning and dragged the sled on its side until they could pull it no far- ther. Then they began to fight among themselves. The handlers ducked under the yellow tape and rushed in to get the dogs under control, while others tended to the fallen driver.

The red-sled driver pushed ahead at full speed, although he had the race won, not slowing until he had passed over the finish line. The sled was still moving when he jumped off it and grabbed a harpoon from a barrel. Without pausing to aim, he sent the spear winging to- ward an archery target set up near the course. The spear hit the bull's- eye at dead center. Then he pulled a hatchet from his belt and hurled it at the target as well. Bull's-eye again.

The victorious driver raised his fists high in the air and let out a chilling cry of victory, then strutted around the perimeter of the race course, his wide mouth set in a grin, his face like a malevolent jack- o'-lantern. His arrogant posturing put to rest any doubts that the col- lision was an accident. A lone boo issued from the stunned crowd, then was joined by others, growing into an angry chorus as the spec- tators showed their disapproval of the winning tactics. Disgusted with the race, guests began to move back to the museum.

The driver gestured at the departing spectators as if daring some- one to step forward. His gaze swept the crowd-looking for anyone brave or foolish enough to take him on-when it fell on Austin. The dark eyes narrowed into slits. Austin tensed. Standing only a few feet away was the man who had slashed him and tossed a hand grenade into his boat at the Mermaid's Gate. He would have recognized the man from the hate burning in his feral eyes even without the vertical tattoo lines on the cheekbones and the mangled knot of flesh where Austin had bashed him in the nose.

The thick lips in the dark, wide face formed a silent word. Austin.

Austin was stunned that the man knew his name, but he hid his surprise.

Using his most mocking tone, he said, "Long time no see, Nanook. You owe me for the plastic surgery I did on your pretty face."

The driver stepped closer until they were a foot or so apart, sepa- rated only by the yellow tape. Austin could smell the man's fetid breath.

"The name is Umealiq/' he said. "I want you to call my name when you beg me for mercy."

"Don't blame you for being dissatisfied with your nose job," Austin said evenly. "You didn't give me a lot to work with. Pay me for the boat you blew up and we'll call it even."

"The only payment you will get is death,ff the man snarled. His thick fingers dropped down to his belt, and he began to slide the bone knife from its scabbard. Although most of the spectators had left, there were still knots of people hanging around. Austin sensed that there was no safety in numbers and the man would not hesitate to kill him, even in front of dozens of witnesses. He clenched his right fist, ready to send it crashing into the broken nose, where it would inflict

the most damage and pain.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sudden movement. Ben Nighthawk had hurled himself at the driver. The Indian was too light and his tackling form too imperfect to do any damage. The driver grunted, and his squat body shuddered slightly from the im- pact, but he kept his footing and swatted Nighthawk aside with a mighty blow.

Again the hand groped for the knife, and he took a step forward, only to freeze at the sound of a commotion. The blue-sled driver was making his way across the Mall, accompanied by several angry han- dlers. Dirt and blood stained his face. Umealiq whirled to face the newcomers. They exchanged angry words, obviously arguing over the race tactics. With a quick burning glance back at Austin, the red- sled driver pushed his way through the others and made his way back to the trucks.

Therri was down on her knees, tending to Nighthawk. Austin went to her side and saw that the Indian's only injury was a bruise where he'd been struck under the eye. As they helped him to his feet, he spit the words out: "That was the man who killed my cousin."

"You're sure?" Therri said. Nighthawk nodded dumbly. His dazed eyes fixed on the figure walking across the Mall, and he stumbled forward. Austin saw where he was going and stepped in front of him, barring his path. "He and his pals will kill you."

I don t care.

"Now is not the time," Austin said, in a voice that said he wasn't yielding.

Nighthawk saw that his determination wasn't enough to get him past Austin's wide shoulders. He swore in his native language and stalked across the Mall toward the museum.

Therri said, "Thanks for stopping Ben. We should tell the po- lice."

"Not a bad idea. But it might be a problem." A group of men was striding onto the Mall from the direction of

the museum. In the lead was the tall figure of Dr. Barker. He hailed Austin like a

long-lost buddy.

"Nice to see you again, Austin. I'm on my way out and stopped to say good-bye."

"Thanks, but I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, but you are. Umealiq is waiting for you and your friend. You're about to learn why he is named after the stone-headed lance the Inuit use on seal hunts."

Barker pointed to where Scarface stood in the middle of the race- course. Then, escorted by two bodyguards, he strode off to where a limo awaited, leaving the rest of his men behind.

Others came running over from where the trucks were parked. Austin did a quick count and estimated that there were about twenty men in all. Not exactly great odds. Their prospects didn't get any bet- ter when a couple of men ran over to the portable lights that had il- luminated the racecourse and snapped them off.

The Mall had become a big and lonely place. The nearest police presence was a traffic cop on Madison Drive stopping cars so the guests could return to the museum. The remaining guests were mak- ing their way back to the reception, and the passersby had resumed their strolls. Austin's sharp eye followed the shadows that were mov- ing across the grass in a classic encircling maneuver.

He took Therri's arm and tried to guide her toward the museum, but Barker's men barred their way. It was a repeat of the scene in Copenhagen, but this time Austin had no trash-can lid to use as a shield and a weapon. He could see several strollers, and even a cou- ple of National Park Service people, walking through the Mall un- mindful of the unfolding drama, but decided against calling for help. Anyone he talked to would be put in immediate danger.

One light had been left on. Standing in the bull's-eye of illumina- tion, like an actor in the spotlight, was Umealiq. His hand was on his scabbard. His men were closing in from the sides and behind. Austin had no choice. He took Therri's hand, and they slowly began to walk toward what was certain death.

25

DESPITE THE AURA of death in the air, Austin maintained an uncanny

serenity. He had developed the ability to shift his brain into what could best be described as a mental overdrive. While his synapses continued to crackle, an inner voice slowed his thought processes, calmly taking in details fed to it by the senses and formu- lating a plan of action.

He and Therri faced two possible fates. At a signal from their lead- er, the men pacing on both sides could carve them up with their hatch- ets. More likely, Austin judged, Scarface would do the job, as he himself had promised. Austin was working on a third option, al- though it wouldn't have been apparent to their escorts. He glanced fearfully around him, giving the impression of being consumed with panic and confusion, while mentally he mapped out an escape route and calculated the odds.

Therri squeezed his hand until his knuckles hurt. "Kurt, what should we do?" she said, with only the slightest tremor in her voice.

The question gave Austin a sense of relief. It told him that, far from having given up hope, Therri was also looking for a way out of their predicament. Her determination suggested that she could call upon untapped reserves. She would need them, Austin thought. "Keep walking. Just think of it as a stroll in the park." Therri glanced sideways at their silent escorts. "Some stroll. Some park. I haven't had so much fun since our Copenhagen date."

The spark of humor was a good sign. They took a few more steps. Austin murmured, "When I say 'mush,' I want you to follow my lead."

"Did you say 'mush'?" "That's right. Stay with me. Climb up on my heels if you have to.

No matter where I go, stay close."

Therri nodded, and they continued to walk at a snail's pace. Austin and Therri had advanced close enough to Scarface to see the hard eyes glittering like black diamonds under the low-cut bangs. The others seemed in no hurry, probably trying to draw out the terror as long as possible. In their black coveralls, the men looked like mourn- ers at a wake. Austin saw them only as dangerous obstacles to be re- moved or eluded. The real focus of his attention lay off to the left. The red dogsled had been left unattended. The dogs sat or lay curled up on the grass, eyes half-closed, mouths open in a canine grin.

Austin took a deep breath. Timing would be everything.

Another step closer to the end of their lives.

Scarface anticipated their arrival. His hand dropped to the hilt of the bone knife in its scabbard, the cruel mouth widened in a smile, like someone licking his chops over a tender steak. He said something in an unintelligible language. It was only a few words, probably a gloating rernark, but it caught the attention of his men, who all looked in their leader's direction.

Austin gripped Them's hand. "Ready?" he whispered.

She squeezed back.

"Mush!

Austin sidestepped to his left, yanked Therri practically off her feet, and lunged toward a gap in the line of pickets. The guards saw them break out and tried to head them off, like defensive lineback- ers converging to stop a runner with the ball. They raced toward the closing gap. At the last moment, Austin changed direction. He shook offTherri's hand, and putting all the weight of his body behind his shoulder, smashed into the midsection of the guard to his left. The man let out a sound like a malfunctioning steam engine and doubled over.

The other guard charged in, hatchet in hand. Using the bounce from his first encounter, Austin came out of his crouch and slammed into the man with his other shoulder. The impact lifted the other man off his feet. The hatchet went flying onto the grass.

Therri was right behind him. A few more steps and they were at the sled. The dogs noticed their approach and perked their ears up. Austin grabbed the sled's upright framework and held it tight. He didn't want; the dog team to bolt off. Without being instructed, Therri rolled onto the steel-mesh platform, then sat up, legs extended forward, hands gripping the uprights in front of her. Austin kicked off the brake.

"Hike!" he snapped in a clear, commanding voice. The sled's regular driver probably used an Inuit command, but the team knew from his tone what Austin wanted. Mushers don't use the word "mush" to get dogs moving. The word is too soft. Austin was a man of the sea, but he wasn't above developing land-based

skills. Dogsledding, unfortunately, wasn't among them. He had tried dogsled driving a few times as a diversion on ski trips, and after being thrown into snowdrifts a couple of times, he discovered that it looked easier than it was. The driver had to balance on runners that seemed as thin as knife blades, while trying to control a pack of an- imals only a few generations removed from their wolf brethren. Sled dogs were deceptively small, but welded together in a team, they produced an incredible explosion of power with their short legs.

He knew, too, that a dogsled driver had to come across as the leader of the pack if the strong-willed dogs were to respond to his commands. The team was on its feet even before he shouted the com- mand. The gang line connecting the dogs to the sled went taut, and the wheel almost jerked out of his hands. Austin ran several steps, helping the sled along, then he jumped on board and let the dogs do all the work. They bayed loudly, happy doing what they did best, which was to run their hearts out.

From the instant he had gotten his hand on the sled, the whole op- eration had taken only a few seconds. Scarface's men tried to cut the sled off. The dogs were too fast. They barked gleefully as they out- distanced their pursuers. Once they were in the clear, Austin exper- imented with the steering. He tried "gee" and "haw" commands to make the dogs go right and left, and he was glad to see that the team was multilingual. Steering required a tender touch on the wheel, es- pecially on the curves. Turn too sharply and the sled acted like the business end of a bullwhip, although the weight of two people kept all four wheels on the ground.

The combined load also kept their speed down. Austin hadn't considered this a problem, figuring that they could still outdistance a running man, especially the burly Scarface and his short-legged cohorts. His confidence drained away when he looked back. Umealiq s on the other sled in hot pursuit. Austin steered off the grass onto a paved walkway. The sled picked up speed on the smooth asphalt.

But he had to share the walkway, and this was presenting a problem, as he wove around obstacles like a slalom racer. He narrowly missed a young couple, then brushed by a man walking a toy poodle that yapped at Austin. He drove a woman on Rollerblades up on the turf and she swore creatively at him. Angry shouts and curses followed the sled as he pushed the dogs to even greater speed.

He tried to figure out how long the team would last, running at full tilt, and

decided he didn't have much time. Sled dogs are accus- tomed to running in the cold and snow, and with their thick fur coats they would quickly become overheated in the warm evening tem- peratures. He glanced around to get his bearings. They were mov- ing across the Mall, away from the museum, toward the Castle and the Smithsonian quad. He looked behind him. Umealiq had gained ground, and it would be only a matter of time before he caught up.

"Easy," he commanded the dogs, and he put pressure on the brake to reinforce his command. They slowed.

"What are you doing?" Therri said.

"Get off!"

"What?"

"Get off and make a run for the lights and people around the Smithsonian. I can't outrun him with you on board. It's me he really wants."

Therri reluctantly overcame her natural inclination to argue. Comprehending the danger, she rolled off the sled, then got to her feet and started running. Austin shouted at the dogs to get moving. The team took off again in a neck-snapping start. He made a right- angle turn onto another path. The sled felt lighter and more re- sponsive, and he was moving faster than before. He was glad to see Scarface still chasing him. Therri was safe, but pausing to let her on had given Umealiq the chance to gain ground.

Austin's eyes were blurred with the sweat running down his fore- head. He wiped away the moisture with the sleeve of his tux and glanced over his shoulder. Scarface had cut the distance in half. Austin dodged another pedestrian and looked ahead. He could see the white spike of the Washington Monument in the distance. There might be armed security guards around the monument, but he would never make it that far. The dogs were becoming weary. He could feel them slow their pace slightly, and the sled was acting like a car run- ning out of gas. He urged the team on with the kissing sound he had heard the drivers use during the race.

Cars were moving along the street ahead of him. With luck and timing, he could put the traffic between him and his pursuers. The sled emerged from the Mall onto the sidewalk. Austin saw an open- ing between two moving vehicles and

steered for it, hoping to whisk through to the other side of the street. The dogs hesitated, but he urged them on. The paws of the lead dog had left the curb when one of the ubiquitous limos that prowled the streets of Washington came out of nowhere and cut him off.

Austin cut the steering wheel hard. The lead dog was way ahead of him and had already changed directions, dashing off to the right with the team and the sled behind him. The sled heeled over at an angle like a boat sailing close to the wind. Austin compensated with his body, and the sled slammed back down on all four wheels and straightened out. The dogs were pulling the sled along the sidewalk. Scarface had cut the angle and was pacing Austin along the side- walk a few yards away.

The two sleds raced along the sidewalk like the chariot racers in Ben-Hur. The dogs swerved around pedestrians. Austin had just about relinquished control, conceding that the dogs could steer the ed far better than he could, and simply concentrated on hanging on. Even at top form, his skills would have been no match for the other driver. The sleds were running side by side, almost close enough to touch. Then Scarface upped the ante and aimed a pistol at Austin from a few feet away.

Austin had the feeling that someone had just painted a bull's-eye on his forehead. But getting a clean shot wouldn't be easy. Scarface held the wheel with his left hand and the pistol in his right. Without the stability of two hands holding on to the wheel, the sled wavered from side to side, and Scarface was finding it impossible to keep the pistol barrel leveled. He tried a shot anyhow.

The bullet missed Austin and went high. Austin took little com- fort from the wild shot. Scarface would keep trying until he emptied his gun. Even if the flying lead missed Austin, someone else could be hurt or killed. Acting more on instinct than intellect, Austin quickly touched his brakes. The Eskimo's sled pulled slightly ahead of him. Borrowing a page from Umealiq's book of dirty race tactics, Austin angled his sled to the right. His front wheel slammed into the rear wheel of the other sled, and Scarface fought to maintain control.

The maneuver was risky, but it had the desired effect. With only one sweat-soaked hand gripping the steering wheel, Scarface was unable to stop the rim from spinning. The sled's front wheels jack- knifed. The sled itself fishtailed, then flipped, and Scarface tumbled off, the pistol flying out of his hand and

clattering onto the sidewalk. He rolled several times before coming to a stop. His dog team kept on running, dragging the sled on its side, before they figured out it was a waste of time.

Austin was in no position to celebrate. His team was pulling the sled toward Constitution Avenue. He yelled a command to stop and jammed his foot down on the brakes, but it was no use. The dogs had been spooked by the gunshot and unnerved by Austin's erratic driv- ing, and he realized he was simply along for the ride. They plunged into the busy boulevard without looking.

The sled flew off the curb, became airborne and slammed down on all four wheels. Austin's teeth rattled in his skull. There was a ban- shee screech as an SUV as big as a house slammed on its brakes, its massive chrome grille only inches away. Austin caught a glimpse of the horrified face behind the wheel, the driver's eyes popping out of his head as he watched a man in a tux drive a sled team across Wash- ington's busiest boulevard.

The best Austin could do was to hang on and try to keep the sled upright. His ears were filled with the squeal of brakes, and then he heard a thud as someone rear-ended another car. There were several more thuds as the chain reaction continued. The air reeked of the smell of burnt rubber. Then he was safely across the avenue, and the dogs were scrambling onto the opposite sidewalk. The sled was mov- ing slow enough for him to jump off before it hit the curb. The dogs were exhausted from running in the unaccustomed heat and had no desire to keep moving. They simply plopped down where they were, their sides heaving and their tongues dripping like faucets.

Austin looked back across the trail of chaos he had left on Con- stitution Avenue. Traffic on his side had come to a stop, and angry people were getting out of their cars to trade registration and license numbers. Scarface stood on the opposite curb, blood streaming down his face. He pulled his knife from his belt. Holding it close to his chest, he stepped off the curb, only to pause at the sound of sirens. Then one of the kennel trucks Austin had seen near the racecourse screeched to a stop, hiding the Eskimo from view for a few seconds. When it took off a second later, the man had vanished.

Austin went over to the panting dogs and patted each one on the head.

"We'll have to do this again, but not too soon," he said.

He brushed the knees and elbows of his tuxedo, but he knew he must look as if he were coming off a weekend binge. Shrugging in resignation, he walked back to the museum. Therri was standing on the Constitution Avenue side of the four-story granite edifice. The expression of anxiety on her face disappeared when she saw Austin

trudging toward her, and she ran over to throw her arms around him.

"Thank goodness you're all right," she said, hugging him in a tight embrace. "What happened to that awful man?"

"He got thrown for a loop by the Washington traffic and called it a night. Sorry I had to kick you off back there."

"That's all right. I've been dumped by guys before, although this is the first time it's been off a moving dogsled."

Therri said that after she had been unceremoniously kicked off the sled, she had found a police cruiser parked near the Castle. She'd told the police that her friend was in danger of being murdered on the Mall, and though the police had looked at her as if she were crazy, they did go to investigate. She had come back to the museum to look for Ben, but there'd been no sign of him. She was trying to decide what to do next when she heard the sirens, walked onto the boule- vard and saw Austin plodding down the avenue. They shared a cab back to their cars and parted with a lingering kiss and the promise to get in touch the next day.

A turquoise NUMA vehicle was in Austin's driveway when he got home, and the front door was unlocked. He walked into the house and heard the Dave Brubeck Quartet playing "Take Five" on the stereo. Sitting in Austin's favorite black leather chair with a drink in his hand was Rudi Gunn, second in command at NUMA. Gunn was a wiry little man, slim with narrow shoulders and matching hips. He was a master of logistics, a graduate of Annapolis and a former com-mander in the navy.

"Hope you don't mind my breaking into your house," Gunn said. "Not at all. That's why I gave you the lock code." Gunn pointed to the glass. "You're getting a little low on your Highland malt scotch whiskey," he said, his lips turning up in his typ- ical mischievous grin.

"I'll talk to the butler about it." Austin recognized the book that

Gunn was holding. "Didn't know you liked Nietzsche."

"I found it on the coffee table. Pretty heavy stuff."

"It might be heavier than you think," Austin said, going over to the bar to mix himself a Dark and Stormy.

Gunn put the book aside and picked up a bound folder from a side table. "Thanks for getting your report to me. I found it far more in- teresting than Mr. Nietzsche's writings."

"Thought you might," Austin said, settling into a sofa with his drink.

Gunn pushed his thick horn-rimmed glasses up onto his thinning hair and leafed through the folder. "At times like this, I realize what a boring life I lead," he said. "You've really missed your calling. You should be writing scripts for video games."

Austin took a big gulp of his drink, savoring the deep flavor of the dark rum and the tingle of the Jamaican ginger beer. "Naw. This stuff is too far-fetched."

"I beg to differ, old pal. What's far-fetched about a mysterious cor- poration that sinks ships by remote control? A long-lost cave with fantastic wall art in the Faroe Islands. A creature out of Jaws that knocks you on your ass." He started to chuckle uncontrollably. "Now that's something I would have liked to witness."

"There's no such thing as respect anymore," Austin lamented. Gunn got his composure back, and he turned a few more pages. "The list goes on and on. Murderous Eskimo thugs who hunt hu- mans instead of seals. Oh yes, a female attorney with a radical envi- ronmental group." He looked up from his reading. "She has long slim legs, I suppose."

Austin thought about Them's figure. "About average in length, I'd say, but quite shapely."

"Can't have everything, I suppose." Gunn put the folder on his lap and gave Austin the once-over, taking in his scuffed shoes, crooked bow tie and the hole in the knee of the tuxedo. "Did the bouncer

throw you out of the museum reception? You look a little, ah, rum- pled."

"The reception was fine. But I learned that Washington is going to the dogs."

'Nothing new there. Hope that tux wasn't rented," Gunn said. "Worse," Austin replied. "I own it. Maybe NUMA will buy me a new one.

"I'll take it up with Admiral Sandecker," Gunn said. Austin refreshed their drinks, then laid out the story of the meet- ing with Marcus Ryan and the evening's events.

After absorbing the account without comment, Gunn tapped the report on his lap. "Any thoughts on how your dogsled adventure fits in with this wild tale?"

"Lots of thoughts, but nothing coherent. I'll sum up what I know in a single sentence. The people who run Oceanus deal ruthlessly with anyone who gets in their way."

"That would be my conclusion, too, based on what you've said.' Gunn paused for a moment, brow furrowed. He had the capacity to think as coldly and clearly as a computer. He processed the moun- tain of information, separating the wheat from the chaff. After a few moments, he said, "What about this Basque character, Aguirrez?"

"Interesting fellow. He's the wild card in this poker game. I talked to a friend at the CIA. Aguirrez may or may not be allied with Basque separatists. Perlmutter is looking into the family background for me. All I know for now is that he's either a Basque terrorist or an amateur archaeologist. Take your pick."

"Maybe he could bird-dog this thing for us. Too bad you can't get in touch with him."

Austin set his drink down, pulled his wallet from his pocket and extracted the card Aguirrez had given him as he was leaving the Basque's yacht. He handed the card to Gunn, who noted the phone number on the back. "Why not?" he said, and handed the card back.

Austin picked up a phone and punched out the number. He was tired from the night's exertions, and his expectations were low. So he was startled when he

heard the familiar basso voice on the line.

"What a pleasant surprise, Mr. Austin. I had the feeling we'd be talking again."

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"Not at all."

"Are you still in the Faroes?"

"I am in Washington on business."

"Washington?" "Yes, the fishing in the Faroes didn't live up to its reputation. What can I do for you, Mr. Austin?"

"I called to thank you for pulling me out of some difficulties in

Copenhagen."

Aguirrez made no attempt to deny that his men had chased away the club-yielding thugs who'd attacked Austin and Them Weld. He simply laughed and said, "You have a way of getting yourself in dif- ficult situations, my friend."

"Most of my troubles have to do with a company called Oceanus.

I was hoping we might chat about that subject again. Maybe you could bring me up to date on your archaeological investigation as well."

"I'd like that very much," Aguirrez said. "I have meetings in the morning, but tomorrow afternoon would be convenient."

They agreed on a time, and Austin jotted down the directions Aguirrez gave him for an address in Washington. He hung up and started to fill Gunn in on the short conversation, when the phone rang. It was Zavala, who had returned from Europe. Joe had fixed the problems with the Sea Lamprey, then had jumped ship when the Beebe had been invited by the Danish vessel Thor to join in a Faroe Islands research project.

"Just wanted to let you know I'm home. I've hugged my Corvette and I'm about to head out for a nightcap with a beautiful young lady," Zavala said. "Anything

new since I last saw you?"

"The usual stuff. Tonight, a crazy Eskimo on a dogsled chased me through the Mall with murder in his heart. Other than that, things are quiet."

There was silence at the other end of the line. Then Zavala said, "You're not kidding, are you?"

"Nope. Rudi's here. Drop by my place and you'll get the whole sor- did story."

Zavala lived in a small building in Arlington, Virginia that had once housed a district library. "Guess I'm cancelling that date. Be by in a few minutes," he said.

"One more thing. Still got that bottle of tequila we were going to break into back in the Faroes?" "Sure, it's in my duffel bag." "I think you better bring it with you."

26

THE NEXT MORNING, Austin stopped at the Museum of Natural History on the way to NUMA headquarters. Gleason was in the exhibition hall when Austin arrived, and he didn't look happy. The guests, music and food of the reception had disappeared, but that wasn't the main cause of his concern. The display cases were empty. Not even a placard remained.

Gleason was beside himself. "This is terrible, absolutely terrible," he was saying.

"Looks like you had a fire sale," Austin said.

"Worse. This is a total disaster. The sponsors have pulled the ex- hibition."

"Can they do that?" Austin realized it was a dumb question, even as the words left his mouth.

Gleason waved his arms. "Yes, according to the small print in the contract they insisted we sign. They are allowed to break up the ex- hibition any time they want to and give us a small monetary com- pensation instead."

"Why did they close the show?"

"Damned if I know. The PR firm that set the whole thing up said they're just following orders."

"What about Dr. Barker?"

"I tried to get in touch with him, but he's vanished into thin air."

"You've been closer to Oceanus than most people," Austin said getting to his real reason for stopping by the museum. "What do you know about Dr. Barker?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I know more about his ancestor."

"The whaling captain he mentioned?"

"Yes, Frederick Barker, Sr. One of the Kiolya knives you saw on display originally belonged to him. It was more than a hundred years old. Dreadful thing, and razor-sharp. Gave me a stomachache just looking at it."

"Where would I look for information on Captain Barker?"

"You can start in my office." Gleason cast a woeful glance at the empty display cases. "C'mon. Not much for me to do here."

The office was in the administrative wing. Gleason gestured for Austin to take a seat, then plucked an old volume from the shelf. The title was Whaling Captains of New Bedford. He opened the book to a page and plopped it in front of Austin.

"I dug this out of our library when the exhibition first came through. That's Captain Barker. The New England whaling skippers were a tough lot. Many became captains in their twenties. Mutinies, destructive storms, hostile natives- all in a day's work to them. The adversity made some men ogres, others humanitarians."

Austin examined the grainy black-and-white photograph in the book. Barker was dressed in native garb, and it was hard to make out his features. A fur parka framed his face, and bone goggles with hor- izontal slits in them covered his eyes. White stubble adorned his chin.

"Interesting eyewear," Austin said. "Those are sunglasses. The Inuit were very aware of the dangers from snow blindness. They would have been particularly

important to Barker, whose eyes were probably sensitive to light. There was albinism in Barker's family. They say that's why he spent so many win- ters in the frozen north, to avoid the direct sunlight."

Gleason explained that in 1871, Barker's ship, the Orient, was wrecked, and the captain was the only survivor. "The natives saved Barker's life, and he spent the winter in an Eskimo settlement. He recounts how the chiefs wife pulled off his boots and thawed his frozen feet out with the warmth of her naked bosom."

"I can think of worse ways to thaw out. Where does the Kiolya tribe come in ?"

"They were the ones who saved him."

"That seems out of character with what you told me of their blood- thirsty ways. I would have expected them to kill a stranger."

"That would have been the normal case, but don't forget that Barker stood out from the ordinary whale hunter. With his pure white hair, pale skin and eyes, he must have looked like some sort of snow god."

"Toonook, perhaps." "Anything is possible. Barker didn't go into detail about some things. Quaker society in New Bedford would not have approved of one of their number posing as a god. The experience transformed him, though."

"In what way?" "He became a staunch conservationist. When he got home, he urged his fellow whale men to stop slaughtering the walrus. The Ki- olya rnuscled in on the walrus hunting grounds like a street gang tak- ing over new drug turf. They even took women and tools from those they conquered. The other Inuit tribes practically starved as a result until they banded together and drove the Kiolya away. Barker saw this conflict over walrus meat and wanted to end it. He was grateful

to the Kiolya and thought if the walrus were saved, they might change their marauding ways." "Was he right?"

"Barker was naive, in my view. I don't think anything would have changed their behavior, short of brute force."

Austin pondered over the answer. As a student of philosophy, he was a great believer in the theory that past is present. The Kiolya might be the key to

unraveling the tangled skein that surrounded Oceanus.

"Where could I go to learn more about the tribe?" "Canadian police blotter, for the most part, I'd venture. There isn't much information between their diaspora and the present, but I did find a crazy story that verifies what I said earlier about the god thing." He rummaged around in a filing cabinet and produced a 1935 clip from The New Yor/ Times, encased in a plastic envelope. It was datelined Hudson Bay. Austin took a minute to read the story:

The Arctic north added another mystery to its history of explo- ration when a half-crazed German crawled out of the frozen tun- dra claiming that he was the sole survivor of an airship disaster.

Canadian authorities said the German, who identified himself as Gerhardt Heinz, was brought in by a group of unknown Eskimos who had apparently rescued him. The Times found Mr. Heinz in a hospital ward, where he died a short time later. In the interview, Mr. Heinz said,

"I was on a secret trip to the North Pole for the greater glory of the Fatherland. We landed at the pole, but on the way back, we sighted the wreck of a boat frozen in the ice. The captain insisted on landing on the ice to investigate. It was a boat of great antiquity, probably hundreds of years old. We removed a frozen body, which we placed in the airship cooler, along with some unusual items.

"After rising from the ice and traveling a distance, we experi- enced mechanical problems, and had to land. The survivors de- cided to try to cross the ice, but I stayed to guard the zeppelin. I was near death when the local natives found me, and I was nursed back to health."

Mr. Heinz said that the natives spoke no English, but he learned that their name was 'Kiolya.' He said that they thought he was a god, having come from the skies, and when he requested through sign language that they bring him to the nearest settlement, they complied.

German authorities contacted by the Times said that they had no knowledge of Mr. Heinz nor of any dirigible voyage to the North Pole.

Austin asked Gleason to run off a copy of the article and thanked him for his time and information. "Sorry about your exhibition," he said on the way out.

"Thank you." Gleason shook his head. "It simply astounds me why they pulled up stakes so abruptly. By the way, have you heard about Senator Graham? That's another disaster. One of our strongest supporters."

Austin said, "I think I saw Graham last night at the reception."

"You did. While he was driving home to Virginia, his car was forced off the road by a truck. He's in critical condition. Hit-and- run."

Sorry to hear about that, too.

"Damn," Gleason said. "Hope it's not true about bad things run- ning in threes."

"There may be a simpler explanation for your run of bad luck," Austin said.

"Oh, what's that?" Austin pointed to the sky, and in all seriousness, said: "Toonook."

27

ST. JULIEN PERLMUTTER stepped into his spacious Georgetown carriage house and cast an appreciative glance around at the hundreds of volumes, old and new, that spilled off the sagging wall shelves and flowed like a vast river of words, breaking off into tributaries that ran into every room.

An ordinary human being confronted with this seeming confusion would have fled the premises. A beatific smile came to his lips, as his eye lingered on one stack, then moved on to another. He could rat- tle off titles, even quote whole pages, from what was generally ac- knowledged to be the world's most complete collection of literature regarding historic ships.

He was starving after dealing with the rigors of a trans-Atlantic flight. Finding space aboard a plane to accommodate his substantial bulk was not a problem; he simply reserved two seats. But even the Binary offerings of first class were, to Perlmutter's way of thinking, the equivalent of a church ham-and-bean supper. He headed for the kitchen like a heat-seeking missile and was glad to see that the house- keeper had followed his shopping instructions.

Even though it was early in the day, before long he was dining on a Provenale-style stuffed lamb with potatoes perfumed with thyme and washed down with a

simple but well-balanced Bordeaux. Thus fortified, he was dabbing at his mouth and magnificent gray beard with a napkin when the phone rang.

"Kurt!" he said, recognizing the voice on the line. "How in blazes did you know I was back?"

"There was a report on CNN that Italy had run out of pasta. I as- sumed you would be coming home for a square meal."

"No," Perlmutter boomed. "Actually, I returned because I missed being taunted on the phone by impertinent young whippersnappers who should know better."

'You sound in fine fettle, St. Julien. It must have been a good trip."

'It was, and I do feel as if I've eaten all the pasta in Italy. But it's good to be back on my own turf."

"I wondered what you had turned up on my historical query." "I was going to call you later today. Fascinating material. Can you drop by? I'll brew up some coffee, and we can talk about my find- ings.

"Five minutes. I just happen to be driving through Georgetown." When Austin arrived, Perlmutter served two giant cups of cafe latte. He pushed aside a pile of books to reveal a chair for Austin, and another stack to make room for his own wide haunches on an over- sized sofa.

Perlmutter sipped his coffee. "Well, now, getting down to business... After you called me in Florence, I discussed your query about the Roland relics with my host, a Signor Nocci. He remembered a his- torical reference he had seen in a letter to the Medici Pope penned by a man named Martinez, who was a fanatical supporter of the Span- ish Inquisition, particularly where it applied to the Basques. Mr. Nocci put me in touch with an assistant curator at the Laurentian Li- brary. She dug out a manuscript written by Martinez in which he di- rects particular venom at Diego Aguirrez."

"The ancestor of Balthazar, the man I met. Good work." Perlmutter smiled. "That's only the start. Martinez says flatly that Aguirrez had the sword and the horn of Roland and that he would pursue him, and I quote, 'to the ends of the earth,' to retrieve these objects."

Austin let out a low whistle. "That establishes that the Roland relics were real and puts them directly in the hands of the Aguirrez family."

"It would seem to verify the rumors that Diego was in possession of the sword and horn."

Perlmutter passed over a folder. "This is a copy of a manuscript from the Venice State Archives. It was found at the naval museum in a file having to do with war galleys."

Austin read the title on the first page. "An Exoneration of a Man of the Sea." The publication date on the frontispiece was 1520. The preamble described the work as, An account by Richard Blackthorns an unwilling mercenary in the service of the Spanish Inquisition, a hum- ble sailor who has always stood in defence of His Majesty's name, in which he proves infamies that have been brought against him to be untrue and warns any and all never to trust the murdering Spaniards.

He glanced up at Perlmutter. "Blackthorne is surely a master of the never-ending sentence, but what does he have to do with Roland and the long-dead Aguirrez?"

"Everything, m'lad. frything." He looked into the bottom of his coffee cup. "While you're up, old boy, would you fetch me a re- fill? I'm feeling peaked after the rigors of travel. Get one for your- self."

Austin had no intention of getting up, but he rose from his chair and went for the refills. He knew that Perlmutter functioned best when he was eating or drinking.

Perlmutter sipped his coffee and ran his hand over the manuscript as if he were reading it with his fingers. "You can study this at your leisure, but I'll give you a quick summary now. Apparently, Black- thorne fell afoul of rumors that he had willingly served the hated Spaniard, and he wanted to set the record straight." "That came across loud and clear in the preamble." "Blackthorne was worried about the stain on his name. He was born of a respectable merchant family in Sussex. He went to sea as a youth and worked his way up from cabin boy to master of a merchant vessel plying the Mediterranean. He was captured by Barbary pi- rates and forced to become a rower on an Algerian galley. The gal- ley was shipwrecked, and he was rescued by the Genoese, who turned him over to the Spanish."

"Remind me never to be rescued by the Genoese." "Blackthorne was a hot

potato. According to the Inquisition sys- tem, any Englishman was a heretic, and subject to torture, arrest and execution. English and Dutch sailors shunned Spanish ports for fear they would be arrested. If you were caught with a copy of the King James Bible or possessed some ancient classic deemed heretical, you were, to put it literally, toast."

Austin glanced down at the folder. "Either Blackthorne survived or his memoirs were ghostwritten."

"He had nine lives, our Captain Blackthorne. He actually escaped once from the Spanish but was recaptured. He was eventually dragged from his dark cell in irons to stand trial. The prosecutor called him an enemy of the faith and 'other opprobrious names,' as he put it. He was condemned to death and was headed for the stake, when fate intervened in the unlikely form ofEl Brasero."

"Isn't that the name of a Mexican restaurant in Falls Church?" "You're asking the wrong man. I've always considered 'Mexican' and 'restaurant' uttered in the same sentence as no less an oxymoron than 'military intelligence.' El Brasero means 'brazier' in Spanish. It was the nickname given the aforementioned Martinez for his zeal in putting the torch to heretics."

"Not the type you would invite to a barbecue."

"No, but he proved to be Blackthorne's savior. The Englishman impressed Martinez with his resourcefulness, and his ability to speak Spanish, but more important, Blackthorne was familiar with war galleys and sailing ships."

"That shows the lengths to which Martinez would go to catch

Aguirrez, even sparing a victim."

"Oh, yes. We know from his writings that he thought Aguirrez was especially dangerous because he had been charged with the steward- ship of the Roland relics and might use them to rally his countrymen against the Spaniards. When Aguirrez escaped arrest in his ship, Mar- tinez went after him. Blackthorne was commanding Brasero's lead galley when they caught up with Aguirrez on his caravel off the coast of France in 1515. Although he was becalmed, outnumbered and out- gunned, Aguirrez managed to sink two galleys and put Martinez to flight."

"The more I learn about Diego, the more I like him." Perlmutter nodded. "His strategy was brilliant. I intend to include this fight in a collection I'm preparing of classic sea battles. Unfor- tunately, Brasero had the services of an informer who knew that Aguirrez always stopped in the Faroe Islands to rest before crossing the ocean to North America."

Austin leaned forward in his chair and murmured, "Skaalshavn." "You know it?"

"I was in Skaalshavn a few days ago."

"Can't say I'm familiar with the place."

"Can't blame you, it's quite remote. A picturesque little fishing vil- lage with a natural harbor of refuge. There are some interesting caves nearby."

"Caves?" The blue eyes danced with excitement. "Quite an extensive network. I've seen them. From the drawings on the walls, I'd say they've been occupied off and on going back to ancient times. The Basques, or others, may have been using them for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years."

"Blackthorne mentions the caves in his narrative. In fact, they were instrumental in his story." "In what way?"

"Aguirrez could easily have outdistanced his pursuers and fled to North America, where Brasero would never find him. The Basques were the only mariners intrepid enough to sail the Atlantic in those days. But Diego knew that Brasero would go after his family. And he knew that even if he stashed the relics in North America, when he returned to Europe, Brasero would be waiting."

"Maybe he decided to take a stand for the most primal of reasons," Austin said. "He wanted his revenge on the man who had ruined his life and stolen his fortune."

"No disagreement there. Brasero was just as determined to finish the job he'd started. He had switched from his galley to a warship twice the size of Diego's caravel. He had put Blackthorne in com- mand. The ship bristled with guns that would have made short work of the Basques. But Diego knew from their previous encounter of the informant on board Brasero's ship and prudently moved the caravel away from the caves. Diego stationed a handful of his men on shore, where they could be seen by Brasero, and when Martinez launched his

boats, the men ran into the caves, drawing their pursuers after them."

"I smell a trap." "You've got a better nose than Martinez, although in fairness, he

was probably distracted by thoughts of all the fun he was going to have burning Diego and his crew."

"Shades of Custer's Last Stand. That cave system is a labyrinth. Perfect to stage an ambush."

"Then I'm sure you won't be surprised to hear that's what hap- pened. It was a two-pronged strategy. The caravel swept down on the warship and cowed its skeleton crew with a few cannon shots. Then they boarded the ship and took it over. Meanwhile, Diego launched his ambush. He had dragged one of his ship's cannon into the caves and used it to take the wind out of the attack." Perlmutter raised a pudgy fist as if he were reliving the battle. "Brasero was a skilled swordsman, but Aguirrez was better. Instead of killing him, he toyed with Martinez before he doused Brasero's flame forever."

"Where was Mr. Blackthorne in all this?"

"One of Brasero's men went to take a shot at Diego. Blackthorne killed the man. Diego had his men bring Blackthorne to him. The Englishman laid out his story. Diego needed a skilled captain to command the warship, so he made a deal. Blackthorne would take charge of the ship and get Diego's men home safely. Several weeks later, by Blackthorne's account, he sailed up the Thames with his prize."

"What happened to the Roland relics?"

"Blackthorne never mentions them. But by his account, Diego called for a small volunteer crew to stay with him and sent the oth- ers home with Blackthorne. Diego no longer needed gunners and cannon crew, only skilled sailors. Even with Brasero dead, he knew the relics would not be safe as long as the Inquisition was alive. So he continued west, never to be heard from again. Another unsolved mystery of the sea."

"Maybe not/' Austin said. He handed Perlmutter the news clip about the zeppelin crash.

Perlmutter read the story and looked up. "These unusual 'items' Heinz mentions could be the long-lost relics."

"My thoughts exactly. Which means they're in the hands of Oceanus."

"Would Oceanus give them up?"

Austin thought of his run-ins with the Oceanus thugs. "Not likely," he said, with a rueful chuckle.

Perlmutter gazed at Austin over tented ringers. "It seems there is more to this whole saga than meets the eye."

"A hell of a lot more, and I'll be glad to tell you all the gory details over another cup of coffee." Austin lifted his cup. "As long as you're up, old boy, could you fetch me a refill? Get one for yourself."

28

AUSTIN ARRIVED THREE minutes before his appointed meeting time with Aguirrez. After leaving Perlmutter's house, Austin drove down Embassy Row. The gods that look over Wash- ington drivers were smiling, and he found a parking space with no trouble. He walked along Pennsylvania Avenue until he stood in front of a square building that consisted of several dark-glass stories grafted onto some old Washington houses. Austin read the sign next to the front door and wondered if he had the wrong address. Given the troubles the Aguirrez family had had with the Spanish authori- ties through the centuries, the last place he would have expected to find Balthazar was at the embassy of Spain.

Austin gave his name to a security guard at the door and was passed on to the receptionist, who punched out a number on her in- tercom phone and spoke in Spanish to someone on the line. Then she smiled and, in a lovely accent that evoked visions of Castile, said

"Mr. Aguirrez is with the ambassador. He'll be with you in a mo- ment."

A few minutes later, Aguirrez came strolling out of a hallway. Aguirrez had shed his blue sweat suit and black beret and was im- peccably dressed in a dark-gray suit that would have cost Austin a week's pay. But even the best of tailors couldn't hide the peasant hands and sturdy physique. He was talking to a snowy-

haired man who walked beside him, hands behind his back, head lowered in thought as he listened intently to what the Basque was saying. Aguir- rez saw Austin and waved at him. The two men broke off their con- versation, parting with warm handshakes and smiles. Aguirrez

strode over to where Austin stood and wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

"Mr. Austin," he said cheerfully. "How nice to see you again. I'm sorry I didn't introduce you to the ambassador, but he was late for a meeting. Come this way."

Aguirrez led Austin down a hallway to a door into what had been a drawing room in one of the old houses that were part of the em- bassy complex. The centerpiece was an oversized marble fireplace, and the room itself was comfortably appointed with plush rugs and heavy, dark wood furniture. Oil paintings of Spanish rural scenes decorated the walls.

As they took their seats, Aguirrez evidently noted the wondering look on Austin's face, because he said, "You look puzzled, Mr. Austin."

Austin saw no reason to beat around the bush. "I'm surprised to find you here-a man accused of being a Basque terrorist within the walls of the Spanish Embassy."

Aguirrez didn't seem offended. "You have obviously looked into my background, which I expected, so you know that the accusations have not been substantiated."

"Still, I noticed that you're not wearing your black beret." Aguirrez gave out a booming laugh. "In deference to my hosts, I have shed my chapeau, although I miss wearing it. I think that some in this building might think I had a bomb under the beret, and their nervousness would interfere with our work."

"Which is?"

"To settle the Basque problem peacefully once and for all."

"That's a tall order after hundreds of years of conflict."

"I'm confident it can be accomplished."

"What happened to your ancestral quest?"

"The past and the present are inseparable in this cause. The Basque separatists want a homeland. The Spanish government has experi- mented with autonomy, with unfortunate results. If I find the relics I am looking for, their discovery could set off an emotional wave of Basque nationalism. I know my people. It would tear Spain apart."

"So you have suddenly become very important to the Spanish gov- ernment."

He nodded. "I have met with high-level officials in Madrid who asked me to inform your State Department people of the situation and assure them I am not a terrorist. I have agreed, once I find the relics, to put them in safekeeping."

"What's to prevent you from going back on your word?"

The Basque frowned, and a dangerous expression came to his dark eyes. "It is a logical question, and one the Spanish government also asked. I told them that I will honor the memory of my ancestor, who was chosen to be the guardian of the relics. In return, the Span- ish government will take graduated, meaningful steps toward Basque autonomy."

"You're using the relics as leverage?"

He shrugged. "I prefer to call it a solution that takes into account our mutual interests."

"Not a bad deal, considering the fact that you don't have the relics."

"A technicality," he said, the broad smile returning. "I have un- earthed information on the sea routes my ancestor took to the New World. The Basques were in the Faroes as early as 875. After stop- ping at the Faroes, Diego would head for Newfoundland or Labrador. There is ample precedent for this theory. My people fished for cod and whales off North America as far back as the Middle Ages."

"I've read that Cabot found Indians using words that could have had a Basque origin."

"No doubt about it!" he said, his face flushing with excitement. "My research

indicates that there are some unexplored caves near Channel-Port aux Basques in Newfoundland. I will rejoin my yacht there as soon as I clear up my business here, and I am convinced that before long I will hold the sword and horn of Roland in my hands."

Austin paused, wondering how he could gently break the news, then decided that it could not be done. "There may be a problem," he said.

Aguirrez eyed Austin warily. "What do you mean?" Austin handed over an envelope containing a copy of the Black- thorne manuscript. "This material suggests that the relics may not be where you think they are." Austin proceeded to lay out the story Perlmutter had told him. As Aguirrez listened, storm clouds seemed to move in and perch on his brow.

"I know of St. Julien Perlmutter through my own research. He is highly respected as a sea historian." "There is none more knowledgeable."

Aguirrez slammed a fist into his palm. "I Ifnew Diego wasn't killed by Brasero. He escaped with the relics."

"There's more," Austin said. He handed Aguirrez the news clip detailing the interview with the zeppelin's survivor.

"I still don't understand," the Basque said after reading the article. "Oceanus is the owner of the zeppelin that found your ancestor's boat locked in the ice."

Aguirrez saw the connection immediately. "You believe that Oceanus has the sacred relics in its possession?"

"It's a good bet if you follow the chain of evidence." "And in your view, Oceanus can't be approached on this matter?" "I don't think Oceanus can be approached on anythmg Austin said, with a rueful chuckle. "You recall my boating accident? I have a confession to make. An Oceanus security guard blew up my boat with a hand grenade."

"And I must confess that I never believed your story about engine fumes."

"While we're in a confessing mood," Austin said, "maybe you can tell me why your men followed me to Copenhagen."

"A precaution. To be frank, I didn't know what to make of you. I knew from your identity card that you were with NUMA, but I didn't know why you were poking into the Oceanus operation, and assumed it must be an official mission. My curiosity was stirred, so I decided to keep an eye on you. You made no effort to hide your movements. My men happened to be nearby when you were attacked. How is the young lady you were with, by the way?" "She's fine, thanks to the alertness of your men." "Then you're not angry at being followed?" "Not at all, but I wouldn't like to see you make it a habit." "I understand." Aguirrez paused in thought. "Am I correct to as- sume the men who attacked you were from Oceanus?"

"That seems a safe conclusion. The attackers resembled the guards I encountered at the Oceanus operation in the Faroes."

"Oceanus tried to kill you twice. Be careful, my friend, they may try again."

"They already have."

Aguirrez didn't ask for details, and it was obvious he had other things on his mind. He rose from his chair and paced the room Blackthorne's manuscript clutched in his hand. "The people here must not know of this material. Without the relics, the Spanish gov- ernment will lose its incentive to move on Basque autonomy. But this goes beyond political matters," he said in a hollow voice. "I have failed my ancestor Diego by not finding the relics."

"There may still be a way."

Aguirrez stopped his pacing and fixed Austin with a penetrating stare. "What are you saying?"

"We're both interested in nailing Oceanus to the wall. Let's talk about it, taking account, as you said before, of mutual interests."

Aguirrez hiked his bushy eyebrows, but his face remained im- passive. Then he went over to a liquor cabinet and brought back two small glasses and a bottle of greenish-yellow liquor. He poured the glasses full and handed one to Austin, who recognized the distinc- tive scent ofizzara.

An hour later, Austin slid behind the wheel of his car. He wondered if he had made a deal that might come back to haunt him, but he trusted his instincts,

which were all he had to go on at this point. He sensed that Aguirrez was devious but principled, and since they shared the same goals, it would be foolish not to form a loose al- liance.

He checked his cell phone and saw that there were two calls. The first was from the Trouts. He was relieved to hear from them. He knew from working with them on the Special Assignments Team that Paul and Gamay were able to take care of themselves, but at the same time, they had gone looking for Oceanus without knowing how dangerous their mission might be.

Gamay answered his call. She and Paul had returned from Canada a few hours before, and dropped their luggage off at their town house. Then they had gone to NUMA headquarters to meet with Zavala, who was going to update them.

"Did you get inside the Oceanus operation?" Austin asked. "No," Gamay said, "but we bumped into a few of their people." Gamay was being a little too casual. "I know from personal expe- rience that when you bump into Oceanus, it bumps back. Are you and Paul all right?"

"We're fine. A slight concussion for me and a broken wrist for Paul. The cuts and bruises are healing nicely."

Austin swore under his breath, angry at himself for putting his partners in danger.

"I didn't realize what I was getting you into. I'm sorry." Don't be. You only asked us to see what we could learn about Oceanus. It was our decision to go flying off to Canada and poke our noses in where they weren't welcome. It was worth the trip, too. We wouldn't have learned about the devilfish otherwise."

The only devilfish Austin had ever heard of was the manta ray.

Are you sure that concussion is on the mend?"

"I've never been more clearheaded, Kurt. In all my years as a ma- rine biologist, I've never encountered anything like this before. Paul calls it 'white death.5 "

Austin experienced a quick frisson as he recalled his brush with the large, toothy creature in the Oceanus fish tank. "You can fill me in when I get there."

He hung up and punched out Gunn's number. "Hello, Rudi," he said, without the usual exchange of pleasantries. "I think it's time we had a meeting with Sandecker."

29

THE GIANT VIDEO screen in the conference room glowed blue for a second, then an image appeared. There was a flash of silvery-white scales in a net, and Mike Neal was heard shouting, "Hold on, folks, we've got a live one!" There was a blurred glimpse of a fish slamming against the deck and a close-up of a toothy mouth snapping a gaff handle in two. The handheld camera showed the same fish being clouted with a baseball bat. The astonished voices of the Trouts were audible in the background.

Paul Trout clicked the remote control and froze the picture. The lights blinked back on, and a crisp, commanding voice was heard to say, "It seems Jaws has formidable competition."

Admiral James Sandecker, the driving force behind NUMA, sat at a long conference table, his head enveloped in a purple cloud that belched from the fat cigar in his hand.

"That thing up on the screen is in a class of its own, Admiral," said Gamay, who sat at the table along with Austin, Zavala and Rudi Gunn. "The great white shark attacks when it's hungry or hunted. The creature we're looking at is more like Mack the Knife: just plain mean."

Sandecker blew out a plume of smoke and glanced around the table. "Now that you've engaged my attention with what must be the short- est monster movie on record, please tell me what in blazes is going on and what that creature has to do with the cast on Paul's wrist."

Gamay and Paul took turns telling the story of their Canadian adventure, from their visit to the Oceanus fish-processing plant to their talk with the geneticists at McGill.

Austin cut in. "Did you say Frederick Barker?"

"Yes," Gamay said. "Do you know him?"

"We've had a passing acquaintance. His men tried to kill me last night."

Austin gave the gathering a quick rundown of his encounter with Barker and the wild dogsled race through the Mall.

"Congratulations, Kurt. The traffic tie-up you caused was page one in The Washington Post." Sandecker paused in thought. "Let me see if I understand this story to date. You believe that Oceanus or- chestrated the sinking of two ships in Faroe waters to divert atten- tion from a secret project, directed by this man Barker, having to do with the breeding of mutant fish." He gestured at the screen. "Fish similar to the one Paul and Gamay encountered in Canada. And that people from a rogue Eskimo tribe made attempts on your life in the Faroes, in Copenhagen and in Washington."

"Sounds unbelievable when somebody else tells it," Austin said, with a shake of his head.

"Baron Munchausen couldn't have done better. Luckily, Paul and Gamay have verified the existence of these homicidal Eskimos." He turned to Gunn. "What do you make of this fantastic tale, Rudi?"

"Before I answer, I'd like to ask Gamay what could happen if these artificially mutated superfish got into the sea and started breeding."

"According to Dr. Throckmorton, Barker's colleague, in sufficient numbers, they could create a biological time bomb," Gamay said. "They could replace the natural strains of fish within a few genera- tions.

"What's wrong with that?" Sandecker said, playing devil's advo- cate. "Fishermen would have to catch a few large fish instead of many smaller ones."

"True, but we don't know enough about the long-range effects.

What would happen if these Frankenfish had some property that made them unfit for human consumption? What if an unforeseen mutant strain resulted? What if the superfish offspring couldn't sur- vive in the wild? You'd have neither the natural species nor the mu- tants. The ocean system would be thrown out of whack. Fishermen, processing people and distributors would be idled around the world. This would disrupt whole societies that depend upon fish protein for nourishment. Industrial nations would be damaged, as well." "That's quite a

dismal forecast," Sandecker said. "I'm being conservative in my assessment. There are so many unknowns. We know that more than twenty-five species are being targeted for genetic modification. It could mean a tragedy of un- imaginable proportions if they escape into the sea."

"We're assuming that monster up there escaped from a research lab," Rudi said. "Suppose he and others like him were released into the sea deliberately ?"

Gamay stared at Gunn as if he had grown a set of horns. "Why would anyone risk extinction of a whole species? That would be a ter- rible thing."

Gunn shook his head. "Not for everyone."

"What are you saying?" Sandecker asked.

"That the fish will vanish from the sea, but not from the Oceanus holding tanks. Oceanus has been acquiring international patents for its fish genes. The species would be preserved in Oceanus DNA banks."

"Very clever, Rudi," Sandecker said. "Oceanus would have created a monopoly on a major source of the world's protein."

Paul said, "A monopoly like that could be worth billions of dol- lars."

"It goes beyond money," Sandecker said. "Fish protein is a major source of nourishment for much of the world. Food is power."

"This explains why Oceanus is so trigger-happy," Austin said. "If the news got out that they were about to deplete the world's oceans, the adverse public reaction would be overwhelming."

"Certainly sounds plausible," Gunn said. "You establish biofish hatcheries around the world. You could seed the major fish-breeding areas in a short time."

"You wouldn't need many fish," Gamay said. "Each male biofish released could breed with dozens of females. But I'd like to point out there is nothing illegal about dumping fish into the open sea."

"They've been responsible for the loss of two ships and several deaths trying to keep their dirty little secret," Austin said. "They're holding an entire Indian

village captive. Last I heard, murder and kidnapping were illegal."

Sandecker said, "But since we can't pin the killings and other crimes on Oceanus yet, we'll have to proceed with care. We can't go through the regular channels. Even the Canadian government can't know of our action. Oceanus could bring the forces of the law down on us. The Special Assignments Team was formed for missions away from official oversight, so it's the perfect vehicle to carry out our plan."

'I didn't know we had a plan," Zavala said.

'Seems obvious to me," the admiral said. "We blow Oceanus and their bloody scheme out of the water, like the pirates they are. I re- alize it won't be easy. Nighthawk's family and relatives could be placed in jeopardy. The fact that we've stumbled onto the scene might make Oceanus act in haste."

"There's another factor we should take into account," Austin said.

"Marcus Ryan is determined to get SOS involved. They could com- promise our plan and put the captives in real danger."

"That settles it," Sandecker said. "We move immediately. We've got to strike at the heart of this thing, that facility in the Canadian woods. Kurt, did this young Indian give you any inkling where his village was located?"

"Ryan had him on a short leash. Ben seems to have disappeared, but I'll keep trying to find him."

"We can't wait that long." Sandecker's gaze moved over to a scruffy-looking man who had quietly slipped into the room during the discussion and taken a seat in a corner. "Hiram, do you have something for us?"

Hiram Yeager was the director of the vast computer network that covered the entire tenth floor of the NUMA building. The center processed and stored the biggest amount of digital data on the oceans ever assembled under one roof. The brains behind this incredible display of information-gathering power was dressed in his standard uniform, Levi pants and jacket over a pure white T-shirt. His feet were stuffed into a pair of cowboy boots that looked as if they had come from Boot Hill. His long hair was tied in a ponytail, and his gray eyes peered out at the world through wire-rimmed granny glasses.

"Rudi asked me to see if Max would compile a list of places that have experienced sudden fish kills, and to cross-check when possible with nearby fish-processing plants or farms."

"Do you want us to adjourn this meeting to the data center?" Sandecker asked.

Yeager's boyish face beamed with excitement. "Stay right where you are. You're about to see a demonstration of Portable Max."

Sandecker grimaced. He was impatient to get his troops moving and wasn't interested in Yeager's experiments, only their results. But his respect for the computer genius displayed itself in the same un- characteristic patience that allowed Yeager to ignore the NUMA dress code.

Yeager connected a laptop computer to various outlets and to the video screen. He clicked the ON button. Anyone who expected an or- dinary presentation didn't know Hiram Yeager. The image of a woman appeared on the video screen. Her eyes were topaz brown and her hair a shiny auburn, her shoulders bare down to the first hints of her breasts.

It was hard to believe that the lovely woman on the screen was an artificial intelligence system, the end product of the most complex electronic circuitry imaginable. Yeager had recorded his voice, digi- tally altering it to give it a feminine tone, and programmed the face of his wife, a successful artist, into the system. Max tended to be just as testy and petulant as she was.

When he was working in the data center, Yeager sat at a huge console and Max was projected in 3-D onto a giant monitor. "With the Portable Max, you don't have to come to the data center to ask questions. The laptop connects to the mainframe, so I can bring her with me wherever I go. Isn't that right, Max?"

Normally, Max responded to the opening question with a daz- zling smile, but the face on the screen looked as if she had been suck- ing on lemons. Yeager fiddled with the connections and tried again.

"Max? Are you okay?"

The eyes looked down to the bottom of the screen. "I'm feeling rather... flat."

"You look fine from out here," Yeager said.

"Fine?"

"No, you look wonderfulF

Sandecker's patience had run out. "Perhaps you should send the young lady a bouquet of roses."

"That always works for me," Zavala said. Sandecker shot him a withering look. "Thank you for giving us the benefit of your wide experience, Joe. I'm sure you can include it in your memoirs. Hiram, could you cut to the chase, please?"

Max smiled. "Hello, Admiral Sandecker." "Hello, Max. Hiram is correct when he says you look wonderful.

But I think we should end this Portable Max experiment. In the fu- ture, we will visit you in the data center."

"Thanks for your understanding, Admiral. What can I do for you.

"Please produce the data Hiram requested." The face instantly disappeared. In its place was a map of the world.

Max's voice narrated: "This map shows the locations where there have been fish kills near aquaculture facilities. I can give you specifics for each location."

"Don't bother for now. Please show us those aquaculture sites owned by Oceanus."

Some of the circles vanished, but a substantial number remained.

"Now go to Canada," Sandecker said.

The picture zoomed in on Cape Breton. "Bingo!" Paul Trout said. "That's where Gamay and I had our run-in with Oceanus."

Austin said, "Max, could you draw a straight line from the

Oceanus site to the nearest lake in northern Canada?"

The map displayed a line that connected the coastal facility with the interior, but the lake it showed was too small and too close to civiliza- tion. After several tries. Max connected the aquaculture operation to the only lake large and remote enough to fit Nighthawk's description.

"We can run some satellite photos on this site, but my instincts tell me this is the right place," Austin said.

"Thank you, Max. You can shut down now," Sandecker said.

The screen went blank. Sandecker, who was obviously pleased with himself, turned to Zavala and said, "Now that's how you han- dle a woman." His face grew serious. "I think it's time to get mov- ing," he said.

Zavala raised his hand and cleared his throat.

"This is pretty rugged country. Assuming we find these hombres with no trouble, do we just drop in on them?"

Sandecker looked as if the question surprised him. "I'm open to suggestions."

"I've got one. Call in the Royal Canadian Mounties."

"I'm sure you can do it without their help." Sandecker showed his even teeth in a crocodile smile. "You have carte blanche."

"I'd rather have the Mounties," Zavala said. "If they're busy, a contingent of Special Forces might do."

"I don't blame Joe for being doubtful," Austin said, coming to his partner's aid. "As the Trouts and I know, Oceanus shoots first and asks questions later."

"It would take too long to go through the red tape necessary to in- volve the Canadian military or police. As for Special Forces, we would need presidential authority to trespass on Canadian turf. I don't see that coming."

"In that case, I'd like to make a proposal," Austin said. He related his conversation with Aguirrez.

Sandecker puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "Let me see. You'd like to use the

resources of this Basque, who may or may not be a terrorist, to carry out a NUMA mission in a foreign country?" Sandecker said.

"If we can't use the U.S. Marines or the Mounties, he might be all we have."

"Hmm," Sandecker said. "Can he be trusted?"

"He can be trusted to do whatever he can to find his relics. Beyond that I can't say, other than to remind you that he saved my life on two occasions."

Sandecker tugged at his precisely trimmed beard. The idea of using the Basque appealed to the admiral's unconventional side, but he was reluctant to lose control of the situation. On the other hand, he had complete confidence in Austin and his team.

"Use your best judgment," Sandecker said. "There's something else," Austin said. He told them about the overnight closing of the museum exhibition and the accident in- volving Senator Graham.

"But I know Graham well," Sandecker said.

Gunn nodded. "And guess what his commerce committee has been involved in lately? Legislation trying to close loopholes that would allow biofish to be shipped into the U.S."

"Quite a coincidence, isn't it?" Austin said. "Especially since he was returning from a party hosted by Oceanus."

"Are you suggesting," Sandecker said, "that this exhibition was an elaborate cover for an assassination crew?"

"It fits. With Graham out of the way, those loopholes may never be closed."

"I agree. There are certainly enough party hacks around to raise the possibility of bribes," said Sandecker, who had a low opinion of Congress.

Austin said, "Oceanus has cleared away a major obstacle. I think they're about to make their move."

Sandecker rose from his seat and glanced around the table with his cold blue eyes. "Then it's high time we made ours/9 he said.

When Austin returned to his office, a message was waiting for him from the captain of the NUMA research vessel William Beebe, work- ing with the Danes in the Faroe Islands. Call immediately, the mes- sage said, and left a phone number.

"I thought you'd want to know," the captain said, when Austin reached him. "There's been an accident out here. A research vessel working with a Danish scientist named Jorgensen blew up some- how. They lost eight people, including the professor."

Austin had forgotten about Jorgensen's plans to continue his re- search near the Oceanus plant. Now he recalled warning the profes- sor to be careful.

"Thank you, Captain," he said. "Any idea what caused the expio- sion :-

"The lone survivor said something about a helicopter in the area before the

explosion, but she didn't make sense. She was the one who suggested that we call you, in fact. Seems she was on the boat as a guest of the professor. Name was Pia something."

"She's a friend of mine. How is she?"

"Few broken bones, some burns. But the doctors expect that she'll pull through. Sounds like a tough lady."

"She is. Could you give her a message?"

Of course.

"Tell her I'll be over to see her as soon as she's feeling better." "Will do."

Austin thanked the captain and hung up. He stared into space, his jaw muscle working, his blue-green eyes at the topaz level on Moh's scale of hardness. He was thinking of Jorgensen's horsy smile and pia's kindness. Barker, or Toonook, or whatever his name was, had made the mistake of his life. By killing the professor and injuring Pia, he had made it personal.

30

THE SINGLE-ENGINE floatplane flew low, looking like a toy against the vastness of the Canadian wilderness. Therri Weld sat next to the pilot in the front passenger seat, where she had a good view of the ranks of sharp, pointed treetops, any one of which could have ripped the belly out of the fuselage.

The first part of the flight had been spent in white-knuckled ter- ror. Therri had not been reassured when she saw the pair of fuzzy dice hanging in the cockpit. But as the flight proceeded without a hitch, she had concluded that the pilot, an enormous, grizzled man whose name was Bear, actually seemed to know what he was doing.

"Don't get up here very often," Bear shouted over the roar of the engine. "Too remote for most of the 'sportsmen' who come up to go hunting and fishing. Their idea of roughing it is staying at a lodge with inside plumbing." Bear pointed through the windshield at the featureless terrain. "Coming up on Looking Glass Lake. It's really two lakes joined by a short connector. Locals call it the Twins, al- though one's bigger than the other. We'll drop down on the little guy

in a few minutes."

"All I see is trees and more trees," said Marcus Ryan, who sat be- hind the pilot.

"Yeah, bound to find trees in these parts," Bear said, with a cheer- ful grin. He glanced over to see if Therri appreciated the joke on Ryan. She smiled gamely, but her heart wasn't in it. She would have felt far more confident if Ben Nighthawk were with them. Her calls to his apartment had gone unanswered. She'd wanted to keep trying, but Marcus had been in a hurry to get rolling.

"You can pull out if you want to," Ryan had said. "Chuck and I can go it alone, but we've got to move fast because the plane's wait- ing for us." Therri barely had time to pack before Ryan picked her up. Before long, they were piling into the SOS executive jet with Chuck Mercer, the former first mate of the Sea Sentinel. With his ship on the bottom, Mercer was eager to see action.

Therri would have been more enthusiastic if she didn't think Ryan was making up his strategy as he went along. Thanks to the infor- mation from Ben, Ryan knew where to go. Ben had told him the name and location of the lake. It was Ben, too, who had given him Bear's name.

The bush pilot used to be a drug smuggler and was known to work with no questions asked, if the money was right. He hadn't even blinked when Marcus had spun a cock-and-bull tale about doing a documentary film on native culture and wanting to observe Ben's village without being seen.

Bear was usually discreet, but he had become careless living in a community where everyone was aware of his past. He'd let a few Words slip about his job for SOS while he was fueling up the plane. He could not have known that sharp ears were listening, or that un- friendly eyes were watching as his plane took off and headed into the interior.

The lake loomed up suddenly. Therri glimpsed water shimmer- ing in the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun. Seconds later, the plane dropped as if it had hit a downdraft. She felt her heart in her mouth, then the plane bottomed out and slid into a gradually angled trajectory. The floats skimmed the lake's surface a short distance be- fore the plane settled into the water and slowed.

Bear taxied close to shore. When the plane neared a sharply banked beach a few

yards wide, he climbed out of the cockpit onto a float and jumped feetfirst into water up to his waist. He tied an an- chor line onto a strut, pulled the other end over his shoulder and towed the plane closer to shore. He tied up to a stump, then helped the others unload a large package and several smaller ones. They untied the largest bundle, and with the help of a CO capsule, quickly pumped up an inflatable boat about eight feet long. Bear watched with interest, hands on hips, as Ryan tested a quiet, battery-operated outboard motor.

"I'll be back tomorrow/' he said. "You've got the radio if you need me. Watch your ass."

The plane taxied to one end of the lake, took off and headed back the way it had come. Therri went over to where Ryan and Mercer were checking through the pack. Mercer unwrapped a block ofC-4 explosives and examined the detonators.

He smiled and said, "Just like the old days."

"Sure you're up for this, Chuck?"

"You're talking to the guy who sank an Icelandic whaling ship practically single-handed."

"That was a few years ago. We're a lot older now."

Mercer fingered a detonator. "Doesn't take much energy to push a button," he said. "I owe these bastards for our ship." Mercer had been steaming since he'd learned that Oceanus's ships were serviced at the same Shetlands boatyard where the Sea Sentinel could have been sabotaged.

"We can't forget Josh, either," Ryan said. "I haven't forgotten Josh. But are you sure there's no other way?" Therri said.

"I wish there were," Ryan said. "We've got to play hardball."

"I'm not arguing with the need to do something, but the means. What about Ben's people? You're risking their lives."

"We can't be diverted from our prime goal. We know from our contacts on Senator Graham's staff that Oceanus continued the trans- gendered fish experiments that were halted in New Zealand. We've got to stop this abomination

before it is unleashed."

Abomination? You're scaring me, Marcus. You're talking like a Biblical prophet."

Ryan's face flushed, but he held his temper. "I have no intention of making Ben's people collateral damage. Oceanus will be too busy dealing with our little gifts to do anything. In any case, we'll call the authorities as soon as we're finished here."

"It would only take a few bursts from an automatic weapon to kill

Ben's people. Why not call in outside help now?"

"Because it would take time we don't have. We're talking search warrants and legal process. The villagers could be dead by the time the Mounties decide to investigate." He paused. "Remember, I tried to bring NUMA in on this, and Austin refused."

Therri bit her lower lip in frustration. Her loyalty toward Ryan was intense but not uncritical.

"Don't turn your sights on Kurt. If it weren't for him, you'd be eat- ing sardines in a Danish prison cell."

Ryan beamed his lighthouse smile. "You're right. I'm out of line.

But there's still time to call Bear and have him take you out of here."

"Not on your life, Ryan."

Mercer had finished organizing their backpacks. He strapped on a pistol belt and handed one to Ryan. Therri refused a weapon. They piled their supplies into the inflatable, shoved it off the beach and started the engine. It ran with a low hum and pushed them through the water at a slow but respectable speed. They hugged the shoreline even after they had passed through the channel into the larger lake.

Ryan was using a topographic map with notations based on Ben's information. He stopped the boat at one point and peered through his binoculars at the opposite side of the lake. He could make out a pier and several boats, but no

structure matching Nighthawk's de- scription.

"That's funny, I don't see any dome. Ben said it rose above the trees.

"What should we do?" Therri said.

"We'll go to Ben's village and wait there. Then we'll head across the lake, leave our calling cards where they will do the most good and set the timers for late morning, when we'll be well on our way out of here."

They got underway again. The sun was falling behind the trees when they saw the clearing and the dozen or so houses that made up Ben's village. It was deathly quiet, with only a faint soughing in the trees and the lap of the waves against shore breaking the silence. They stopped about fifty yards offshore while Ryan, then the others, checked out the village with light-gathering glasses. Seeing nothing, they cruised straight on in, beached the boat and came ashore.

Ryan was careful, insisting that they check out the houses and store. The village was deserted, as Ben had described. They had something to eat. By the time they finished, darkness was complete, except for a blue-black sheen on the lake and pinpoints of light on the opposite shore. They took turns standing watch while the others slept. Around midnight they were all awake and preparing to move out. They slid the boat into the water and pushed off.

Halfway across the lake, Ryan peered through his glasses, and said, "Jesus!"

The sky across the lake was lit up. He handed the binocs to Therri, but even with her naked eye she could see the dully lit greenish-blue structure that mounded above the trees. It seemed to have dropped from space.

Ryan directed Mercer to steer off to one side, away from the pier. They beached a few minutes later, pulled the inflatable onshore and piled brush around it. Then they made their way along the beach to- ward the pier. When they were a few hundred feet away, they cut in- land and came upon the road that Ben and Josh Green had used to get to the airship hangar. The muddy ruts Ben had described had since been graded and blacktopped.

They were looking for a particular type of building, and found what they were looking for in a structure that hummed with the sound of pumps. Mercer made short work of the padlocks with a tiny cutting torch.

Large glass tanks stretched from one side of the building to the other, and the air inside was heavy with the smell offish and the hum of motors. The room was in semi-darkness, but large pale shapes could be seen moving behind the glass. Mercer got right to work. He placed packets of C-4 in strategic places, molding the putty-like explosive around pumps and electrical conduits where explosions would do the most damage. What was left, he placed on the outside of the tanks.

They worked fast, arming the charges and setting the timers, and were done within thirty minutes. The only people they had seen were those moving in the distance, but Ryan wasn't going to press their luck. They made their way back toward the lakeshore, again with- out encountering anyone. Ryan was beginning to feel uneasy, but he pressed on. If all went as planned, Bear would be picking them up just before the big bang.

Unfortunately, all did not go as planned. Their boat was missing to begin with. Thinking that they may have misjudged the distance in the dark, Ryan sent the others down the beach to look for the boat while he stood watch. When five minutes had passed and they hadn't returned, he struck out after them, and he found Therri and Mercer standing side by side looking out toward the lake.

"Did you find it?" he said.

No answer. They remained motionless. When he moved in closer, he saw why. Their wrists were bound behind their backs with wire, and they had tape across their mouths. Before he could free his friends, the bushes behind the beach erupted and they were sur- rounded by a dozen burly figures.

One man took Ryan's gun away and another came closer and flicked on a flashlight, its beam illuminating the man's hand. Dan- gling in his fingers was one of the charges Ryan had set in the fish house. The man threw the explosives into the lake and put the beam on his own face so that Ryan could be sure to see the pockmarked jack-o'-lantern features and the fierce grin.

He drew a white-bladed knife from his belt and put it under Ryan's chin so that the point dimpled his skin and drew a droplet of blood. Then he uttered something in a strange language and re- turned the knife to its scabbard. Together, they began to march back toward the airship hangar.

AUSTIN EXAMINED THE satellite photograph through the magnifying glass and shook his head. He slid the picture and magnifier across his desk to Zavala. After studying the photo for a moment, Zavala said, "I can see a lake with a clearing on one side and some houses. Could be Nighthawk's village. There's a pier and some boats on the other side, but no airship hangar. Maybe it's hidden." "Maybe we're setting off on a fool's mission, old chum." "Wouldn't be the first time. Look at it this way: Max said this is the place, and I'd trust Max with my life."

"You may have to," Austin said. He checked his watch. "Our plane will be ready in a couple of hours. We'd better get packed."

"I never packed from my last trip," Zavala said. "See you at the airport."

Austin did a quick turnaround at his boathouse and was heading out the door, when he saw the light blinking on his telephone an- swering machine. He debated whether to listen to the message, but when he pushed the button, he was glad he did. Ben Nighthawk had called and left a phone number.

Austin dropped his duffel bag and quickly punched out the num- ber. "Man, am I glad to hear from you," Nighthawk said. "I've been waiting by the phone hoping you'd call."

"I tried to get in touch with you a couple of times."

"Sorry for being such a jerk. That guy would have killed me if you hadn't stepped in. I wandered around and hung out with some pals feeling sorry for myself. When I got back to my apartment, there was a message from Therri. She said that SOS was going off on its own. Ryan talked her into it, I guess."

"Damned fools. They'll get themselves killed."

"I feel the same way. I'm worried about my family, too. We've got to stop them."

"I'm willing to try, but I need your help."

You ve got it.

"How soon can you leave?" "Whenever you want me to."

"How about now? I'll pick you up on the way to the airport.' "I'll be ready."

After Zavala left the NUMA building, he drove his 1961 Corvette convertible to his home in Arlington, Virginia. While the upstairs was spotless, as would be expected of someone who routinely dealt in microscopic tolerances, Zavala's basement looked like a cross be- tween Captain Nemo's workshop and a redneck gas station. It was crammed with models of undersea craft, metal-cutting tools and piles of diagrams marked with greasy fingerprints.

The one exception to the jumble was a locked metal cabinet where Zavala kept his collection of weaponry. Technically, Zavala was a marine engineer, but his duties on the Special Assignments Team sometimes required firepower. Unlike Austin, who favored a custom-made Bowen revolver, Zavala employed whatever weapon was handy, usually with deadly efficiency. He eyed the collection of firearms in the cabinet-wondering what, short of a neutron bomb, would be effective against a ruthless multinational organization with its own private army-and reached for an Ithaca Model 37 repeat- ins shotgun, the primary weapon used by the SEALs in Vietnam. He liked the idea that the shotgun could be fired almost like an automatic weapon.

Zavala carefully packed the shotgun and an ample supply of am- munition into a case, and before long he was on his way to Dulles Air- port. He drove with the top down, savoring the ride because he knew it would be his last in the 'Vette until his assignment was over. He pulled up to a hangar in an out-of-the-way corner of the airport where a crew of mechanics was doing last-minute checks on a NUMA executive jet. He kissed the Corvette's fender and said a sad good-bye, then climbed aboard the plane.

Zavala was going over his flight plan when Austin arrived a short time later with Ben Nighthawk in tow. Austin introduced the young Indian to Zavala. Nighthawk glanced around as if he were looking for something.

"Don't worry," Austin said, noting the expression of consternation on Nighthawk's face. "Joe just looks like a bandit. He really does know how to fly a plane."

"That's right," Zavala said, looking up from his clipboard. "I've passed a correspondence course, all except for the part about the landing."

The last thing Austin wanted was to have Ben bolt from the plane in fright. "Joe likes to kid around," he said.

"I wasn't worried about that, it's-well, is this all there is? I mean just?"

Zavala's lips turned up in a smile. "We hear a lot of that sort of thing," he said, recalling Becker's skepticism when he and Austin had

arrived to rescue the Danish sailors. "I'm starting to get an inferior- ity complex."

"This isn't a suicide squadron," Austin said. "We'll pick up some extra muscle on the way. In the meantime, make yourself comfort- able. There's coffee in that carafe. I'll assist Joe in the cockpit."

They were quickly cleared for takeoff, and the plane headed north. At a cruising speed of five hundred miles an hour, they were over the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in a little over three hours. They touched down at a small coastal airport. Rudi Gunn had checked earlier and found that there was a NUMA survey ship working in the gulf. The way had been smooth through Canadian customs, and before long Austin, Zavala and Ben were climbing aboard the ship, which had come into port. By previous arrangement, the Navarra was waiting ten miles offshore.

As they approached the yacht, Zavala eyed the long, sleek vessel with appreciation. "Pretty," he said. "And from her lines, I'd say she's fast, too, but she doesn't look tough enough to take on Oceanus."

"Wait," Austin said, with a knowing smile.

The Navarra sent over a launch to pick them up. Aguirrez was waiting on deck, his black beret, as usual, perched at a jaunty angle on his head. By his side were the two brawny men who had escorted

Austin after he was plucked from the waters outside the Mermaid's Gate.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Austin," Aguirrez said, pumping Kurt's hand. "Glad you and your friends could make it aboard. These are my two sons, Diego and Pablo."

It was the first time Austin had seen the two men smile, and he noted the

resemblance to their father. He introduced Zavala and Nighthawk. The yacht was already underway by that time, and he and the others followed Aguirrez to his grand salon. Aguirrez mo- tioned for the men to take a seat, and a steward appeared with hot drinks and sandwiches. Aguirrez asked them about their trip and waited patiently for them to finish their lunch before he picked up a remote control. At a click of a button, a section of wall slid up to re- veal a giant screen. Another click, and an aerial photograph filled the space. The photograph showed forest and water.

Nighthawk sucked in his breath. "That's my lake, and my vil- lage."

"I used the coordinates Mr. Austin gave me and fed them into a commercial satellite," Aguirrez said. "I'm puzzled, however. As you can see, there is no sign of this airship building that you mentioned."

"We had the same problem with the satellite photos we looked at," Austin said. "But our computer model indicates that this is the place."

Nighthawk rose and walked over to the screen. He pointed to a section of forest bordering the lake. "It's here, I fnow it is. Look, you can see where the woods have been cleared, and there's the pier." His confusion was evident. "But there's nothing but trees here where the blimp hangar should be."

"Tell us again what you saw that night," Austin said.

"The dome was huge, but we didn't see it until the airship ap- peared. The surface was covered with panels."

"Panels?" Zavala said.

"Yes, what you see on a geodesic dome, like the one they built for the Olympics in Montreal. Hundreds of sections."

Zavala nodded. "I didn't think that adaptive camouflage technol- ogy was that far advanced."

"Sounds more like invisibility we're talking about," Austin said, gesturing toward the screen.

"Not a bad guess. Adaptive camouflage is a new technique. The surface that you

want to hide is blanketed with flat panels, which sense the scenery and changing light. Then what the sensors see is dis- played on the panels. If you were standing at ground level looking at this thing, all you would see is trees, so the dome would blend into the local forest. Someone obviously took satellite imaging into account. It would be a simple matter to project treetops on the roof panels."

Austin shook his head. "Joe, you never cease to amaze me with your supply of arcane knowledge."

"I think I read about it in Popular Mechanics"

"Nonetheless, you may have solved the mystery," Aguirrez said. "At night, the panels Mr. Zavala talked about could be programmed for the ambient darkness. Mr. Nighthawk saw more than was in- tended when the dome opened for the zeppelin. There's something else that might interest you. I saved photos taken earlier." Aguirrez went back through the memory bank, and projected another aerial photo. "This picture was taken of the area yesterday. There in the corner, you see the outline of a small plane. I'll zoom in on that sec- tion."

The picture of a floatplane filled the entire screen. Four figures could be seen standing on the shore of the lake. "The plane disap- peared a short time after the photo was taken, but look here." An- other image appeared, showing a small boat with three people in it. One of them, a woman, was looking skyward as if she knew they were under surveillance from space.

The Basque's sharp ears picked up the sound of Austin swearing under his breath. Aguirrez raised his bushy eyebrows.

"I think I know who those people are," Austin said by way of ex- planation. "And if I'm right, it could complicate things. How soon can we jump off?"

"We're heading up the coast to a point that will enable you to go the shortest straight-line distance. Two hours maybe. In the mean- time, I can show you what I have to offer."

With his sons taking up the rear, Aguirrez escorted the others down a companionway to a large, brightly lit below-decks helicop- ter hangar. "We have two helicopters," he said. "The civilian one on the stern we use for getting about. This SeaCobra is held in reserve should the occasion arise. The Spanish Navy

ordered a number of these aircraft. Through my connections, I was able to sidetrack one of them. It carries the standard armament." Aguirrez sounded like a car salesman touting the extras for a Buick.

Austin swept his eyes over the naval version of the army Huey, the rocket and Minigun pods slung under the stubby wings. "The stan- dard armament will do just fine."

"Very good," Aguirrez said. "My sons will accompany you and your friend in the Eurocopter, and the SeaCobra will go along with you in case you need backup." He furrowed his brow. "I'm concerned that someone smart enough to use such clever camouflage would have the best detection technology. You could be greeted by a wel- coming party, and even a heavily armed helicopter would be vul- nerable."

"I agree," Austin said. "That's why we're going in by land. We'll put down at an abandoned logging camp, and Ben will guide us through the forest to our target. We think they will expect any in- trusion to come across the lake, as Ben did before, so we'll come in from behind. We'll escape the same way-hopefully, with Ben's fam- ily and friends."

"I like it. Simple in planning and execution. What do you do when you get to your target?" Aguirrez asked.

"That's the hard part," Austin replied. "We don't have much other than Ben's account and the aerial photos. We'll have to improvise, but it wouldn't be the first time."

Aguirrez didn't seem worried.

"Well, then, I suggest we get started." He signaled Diego, who went over to a phone next to a battery of switches. He spoke a few words, then began to punch buttons. There was the hum of motors an alarm horn sounded, and doors in the ceiling slid slowly apart. Next, the floor started to move upward, and moments later, they and the helicopter were lifted up to the deck, where crewmen, alerted by the call, hurried in to prepare the SeaCobra for action.

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THE VESSEL THAT Dr. Throckmorton had commandeered for his survey was a

stubby converted stern-trawler used by the Canadian Fisheries Service. The one-hundred-foot-long Cormorant was docked near where Mike Neal's boat had been tied up on the Trouts' first visit to the harbor.

"To quote the great Yogi Berra, This is like deja vu, all over again,' " Trout said, as he and Gamay walked up the gangplank onto the deck of the survey vessel.

She gazed out at the sleepy harbor. "Strange being back here. This place is so peaceful."

"So is a graveyard," Paul said.

Throckmorton bustled over and greeted them with his usual ef- fusiveness. "The Doctors Trout! What a pleasure it is to have you aboard. I'm so glad you called. I had no idea after our discussion in Montreal that we'd be seeing each other so soon."

"Neither did we," Gamay said. "Your findings created quite a stir with the people at NUMA. Thanks for having us aboard on such short notice."

"Not at all, not at all." He lowered his voice. "I recruited a couple of my students to help out. A young man and woman. Brilliant kids. But I'm pleased to have adult scientific colleagues aboard, if you

know what I mean. I see you're still wearing your cast. How's the arm.

"It's fine," Paul said. He glanced around. "I don't see Dr. Barker on board."

"He couldn't make it," Throckmorton said. "Personal commit- ment of some sort. He may try to join us later. I hope he shows up. I could use his genetic expertise."

"Then the research hasn't been going well?" Gamay said.

"On the contrary, it's been going fine, but I'm more of a mechanic in this field, if I may use an analogy. I can bolt the frame and chassis together, but it's Frederick who designs the sports car."

"Even the most expensive sports car wouldn't run forever without the mechanic to make the engine go," Gamay said with a smile.

"You're very kind. But this is a complex matter, and I've run into a few aspects that have me puzzled." He frowned. "I've always found fishermen to be superb observers of what's going on at sea. The local fishing fleet has moved on to more productive grounds, as you know. But I talked to a few old-timers, shore captains who watched the fish stocks vanish and be replaced by these so-called devilfish. Now the devilfish have dribbled down to nothing. They're dying, and I don't know why."

"Too bad you haven't been able to catch any."

"Oh, I never said that. Come, I'll show you."

Throckmorton led the way through the "dry lab," where the com- puters and other electrical equipment were kept high and dry, and into the "wet lab," basically a small space with sinks, running water, tanks and table space used for the damp pursuits such as carving up speci- rnens for investigation. He donned a pair of gloves and reached into an oversized cooler. With a hand from the Trouts, he pulled out the frozen carcass of a salmon about four feet long and placed it on a table. "That's similar to the fish we caught," Paul said, bending low to inspect the pale-white scales.

"We would have liked to keep this specimen alive, but it was im- possible. He tore the net apart and would have devoured the rest of the ship if he lived long enough."

"Now that you've seen one of these things up close, what are your conclusions?" Gamay said.

Throckmorton took a deep breath and puffed out his plump cheeks. "It's as I feared. Judging from his unusual physical size, I'd say he's definitely a genetically modified salmon. A lab-produced mutant, in other words. It's the same species as the one I showed you in my lab."

"But your fish was smaller and more normal-looking."

Throckmorton nodded. "They were both programmed with growth genes, I'd venture, but where my experiment was kept under control, there seems to have been no effort to restrain size with this fellow. It's almost as if someone wanted to see what would happen. But size and ferociousness led to its downfall. Once

these creatures destroyed and replaced the natural stocks, they turned on each other." "They were too hungry to breed, in other words?"

"That's possible. Or this design may simply have had a problem adapting to the wild, in the same way a big tree would be uprooted in a storm while a straggly little scrub pine survives. Nature tends to cull out mutants that don't fit into the scheme of things."

"There's another possibility," Gamay said. "I think Dr. Barker said something about producing neutered biofish so they couldn't breed."

"Yes, that's entirely possible, but it would involve some sophisti- cated bioengineering."

"What's next for your survey?" Paul said.

"We'll see what we can catch over the next few days, then I'll bring this specimen and anything else I catch back to Montreal, where we can map the genes. I may be able to match it up with some of the stuff

I have in the computers. Maybe we can figure out who designed it." "Is that possible?"

"Oh, sure. A genetic program is almost as good as a signature. I sent Dr. Barker a message telling him what I found. Frederick is a whiz at this sort of thing."

"You speak very highly of him," Paul said.

"He's brilliant, as I said before. I only wish that he weren't affili- ated with a commercial venture."

"Speaking of commercial ventures, we heard there's a fish- processing plant of some sort up the coast. Could they have had any- thing to do with this?"

"In what way?"

"I don't know. Pollution, maybe. Like those two-headed frogs they sometimes find in contaminated waters."

"Interesting premise, but unlikely. You might see some deformed fish or fish

kills, but this monster is no accident. And we would have seen deformities in other species, which doesn't seem to have been the case. Tell you what, though. We'll motor out and anchor for the night near the fish plant and make a few sets with the net in the morning. How long can you stay on board?"

"As long as you can stand us," Paul said. "We don't want to im- pose."

"No imposition at all." He put the salmon back into the cooler. "You may decide to cut your stay short after you see your cabin."

The cabin was slightly bigger than the two up-and-down bunks it contained. After Throckmorton left them to get settled, Paul tried to ease his six-foot-eight length into the lower bunk, but his legs hung over the side.

"I've been thinking about what Dr. Throckmorton told us," Gamay said, trying the mattress on top. "Suppose you were Dr. Barker and you were working for Oceanus on this biofish thing. Would you want anyone testing genetic material that could be traced to your doorstep?"

"Nope. Judging from our own experience, Oceanus is ruthless when it comes to snoops."

"Any suggestions?"

"Sure. We could suggest that Throckmorton find another location to anchor for the night. Fake a toothache, or make some other ex- cuse.

"You don't really want to do that, do you?"

"As you recall, I whined the whole trip up here because I couldn't go play with Kurt and Joe."

"You don't have to remind me. You sounded as if you hadn't been picked for the Little League team."

"Dr. Throckmorton is a fine fellow, but I wasn't prepared to baby- sit him away from the action."

"And now you think the action may have moved to our doorstep."

Paul nodded and said, "Got a Loony?" Gamay dug out a Cana- dian dollar coin with the picture of a loon on one side.

Paul tossed it in the air and caught it on the back of his cast. Heads. I lose. You get to choose which watch you want."

"Okay, you can take the first two-hour shift, starting as soon as the fest of the crew turns in."

"Fine with me." He extracted himself from the bunk. "I wouldn't get much sleep in this torture rack." He lifted his injured arm in the air. "Maybe I can use this cast as a weapon."

"No need," Gamay said with a smile. She dug into her duffel bap- and pulled out a holster that held a.22 caliber target pistol. "I brought this along in case I wanted to brush up on my target shooting."

Paul smiled. As a girl, his wife had been taught by her father to shoot skeet, and she was an expert marksman. He took the pistol and found that he could aim it if he propped up the cast with his other hand.

Gamay looked at his shaky aim. "Maybe we should both stand watch."

The ship dropped anchor about a mile from shore. The silhouettes of rooflines and a communication tower marked the Oceanus facil- ity, which was located on a rocky hill overlooking the water. The Trouts had dinner in the small galley with Throckmorton, his stu- dents and some crew. Time went by quickly, hastened by talk about Throckmorton's work and the Trouts5 NUMA experiences. Around eleven, they called it a night.

Paul and Gamay went to their cabin and waited until the ship was quiet. Then they crept up onto the deck and took a position on the side facing land. The night was cool. They stayed warm with the heavy sweaters under their windbreakers and blankets borrowed from their bunks. The water was flat calm, except for a lazy swell. Paul sat with his back to the cabin housing, and Gamay lay on the deck beside him.

The first two hours went quickly. Then Gamay took over and Paul stretched out on the deck. It seemed he was asleep only a few minutes before Gamay was shaking him by the shoulder. He came awake quickly and said, "What's up?"

"I need your eyes. I've been watching that dark smudge on the water. I thought it might be a patch of floating seaweed, but it's come closer."

Paul rubbed his eyes and followed the pointing finger. At first, he saw nothing but the blue-blackness of the sea. After a moment, he saw a darker mass, and it seemed to be moving in their direction. There was something else, the soft murmur of voices. "That's the first time I ever heard a patch of kelp talking. How about firing a shot across their bow."

They crawled forward, and Gamay assumed a prone firing position with her elbows resting on the deck, the pistol clasped in two hands. Paul fiddled with a flashlight, but finally got it into position. When Gamay gave him the go-ahead, he flicked the light on. The powerful beam fell upon the swarthy faces of four men. They were dressed in black and were sitting in two kayaks, their wooden paddles frozen in mid-stroke. Their almond eyes blinked with surprise in the light.

Crack!

The first shot shattered the paddle held by the lead man in one boat. There was a second shot, and a paddle in the second boat flew into pieces. The men in the rear of the kayaks back-paddled furiously, and the others dug their hands into the water to help. They got the boats turned around and headed back toward land, but Gamay wasn't about to let them off so easily. The boats were almost out of range of the light when she shot out the other two paddles.

"Good shootin', Annie Oakley," Paul said.

"Good spottin', Dead-Eye Dick. That should keep them busy for a while."

The gunfire wasn't loud by itself, but in the stillness of the night it must have sounded like cannon barrages, because Dr. Throck- morton and some of the crew came on deck.

"Oh, hullo," he said, when he saw the Trouts. "We heard a noise. My goodness-" he said, spying the pistol in Camay's hand.

"Just thought I'd do some target practice."

They could hear voices out on the water. One of the crew went to the ship's rail and cocked his ear. "Sounds as if someone needs help. We'd better get a boat over the side."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Paul said, in his usual soft- spoken manner but with an unmistakable steeliness in his voice. "The folks out there are doing fine on their own."

Throckmorton hesitated, then said to the crewman: "It's all right. I want to talk to the Trouts for a moment."

After the others had shuffled back to their cabins, Throckmorton said, "Now if you wouldn't mind telling me, my friends, exactly what is going on?"

Gamay said to her husband, "I'll go get some coffee. It could be a long night." Minutes later, she returned with three steaming mugs. "I found a bottle of whiskey and poured in a few shots," she said. "I thought we might need it."

Taking turns, they laid out their suspicions of the Oceanus plot, backing them up with evidence gleaned from several sources.

"These are grave charges," Throckmorton said. "Do you have solid proof of this outrageous plan?"

"I'd say the proof is that thing in your lab cooler," Gamay said. "Do you have any more questions?"

"Yes," Throckmorton said after a moment. "Do you have any more whiskey?"

Gamay had thoughtfully stuck the pint in her pocket. After they refreshed his coffee and he had taken a sip, Throckmorton said, "Frederick's affiliations have always bothered me, but I had assumed, optimistically I suppose, that scientific reason would overrule his commercial interests in time."

"Let me ask you a question about the premise we're operating under," Gamay said. "Would it be possible to destroy the native fish populations and substitute these Frankenfish?"

"Entirely possible, and if anyone could do it, it would be Dr. Barker. This explains so much. It's still hard to believe Dr. Barker is with this bunch. But he

has acted strangely." He blinked like some- one coming out of a dream. "Those gunshots I heard. Someone tried to board our ship!"

"It would seem so," Gamay said.

"Perhaps it would be better if we moved on and informed the au- thorities!"

"We don't know where that shore facility fits into the picture," Gamay said, with a combination of feminine firmness and reassur- ance. "Kurt thinks it may be important and wants us to keep an eye on it until his mission is completed."

"Isn't that dangerous to the people on board this ship?"

"Not necessarily," Paul said. "Just as long as we keep watch. I'd suggest that you have the captain get the ship ready for a quick de- parture. But I doubt our friends will come back, now that we've spoiled the element of surprise."

"All right," Throckmorton said. He set his jaw in determination. "But is there anything else I can do?"

"Yes," Paul said. He took the whiskey from Gamay and poured Throckmorton another shot to calm the professor's nerves. "You can wait."

33

THE SOS CREW stumbled blindly through deep woods, with the guards showing no mercy. Therri tried to get a better look at their tormentors, but a guard jammed a gun into her back with such force that it broke the skin. Tears of pain ran down her cheeks. She bit her lip, stifling the urge to cry out.

The forest was dark, except for lights glowing here and there through the trees. Then the trees thinned, and they were standing in front of a building whose large door was illuminated by an outside floodlight. They were shoved inside the building, the guards cut the wire binding their wrists, and the sliding door was slammed shut and locked behind them.

The air inside smelled of gasoline and there were oil stains on the floor, evidence that the structure had been built as an oversized garage. No vehicles were parked inside, but the garage was far from empty. More than three dozen people-men, women and a few chil- dren-huddled like frightened puppies against the far wall.

Their misery was etched into their tired faces, and there was no mistaking the terror in their eyes at the sudden appearance of strangers.

The two groups stared warily at each other. After a moment, a man who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor got to his feet and came over. His face was as wrinkled as old leather and his long gray hair was tied in a ponytail. He had dark circles under his eyes and his clothes were filthy, yet he projected an aura of unmistakable dignity. When he spoke, Therri realized why the man looked so familiar.

"I'm Jesse Nighthawk," he said, extending his hand in greeting.

"NighthawJ" she said. "You must be Ben's father."

His mouth dropped open. "You know my son?"

"Yes, I work with him in the SOS office in Washington."

The old man glanced past Them's shoulder as if he were looking for someone. "Ben was here. I saw him run out of the woods. He was with another man, who was killed."

"Yes, I know. Ben is fine. I just saw him in Washington. He told us that you and the villagers were in trouble."

Ryan stepped forward and said, "We came to get you and the oth- ers out."

Jesse Nighthawk gazed at Ryan as if he were Dudley Do-Right, the cartoon Mountie who always arrived to save the day. Shaking his head, he said, "You seem to mean well, but I'm sorry you came. You have put yourself in great danger by coming here."

"We were captured as soon as we landed," Therri said. "It was as if they knew we were coming."

"They have watchers everywhere," Nighthawk said. "The evil one told me this."

"The 'evil one'?"

"You'll meet him, I'm afraid. He's like a monster in a heat dream. He killed Ben's

cousin with a spear." Jesse's eyes grew moist at the recollection. "We've been working day and night clearing the forest. Even the women and children..." His voice trailed off in weariness. "Who are these people?" Ryan said.

"They call themselves Kiolya. I think they're Eskimos. I don't know for sure. They started building in the woods across the lake from our village. We didn't much like it, but we're squatters on the land, so we don't have any say in things. Then one day they came across the lake with guns and brought us here. We've been cutting trees and dragging them off ever since. You have any idea what this is all about?"

Before Ryan could answer, there was the sound of the door being unlatched. Six men came into the garage, machine rifles draped in the crooks of their arms. Their dark faces were alike, wide with high cheekbones, and hard, almond-shaped eyes. The cruelty sculpted into their impassive expressions paled next to that of the seventh man to enter. He was built like a bull, with a short thick neck, his head sitting almost directly on powerful shoulders. His yellowish-red skin was pockmarked and his mouth was set in a leer. Vertical tattoo marks flanked his nose, which was bruised and misshapen. He was unarmed, except for the knife hanging in a scabbard at his belt.

Therri stared in disbelief at the man who had pursued Austin on the dogsled. There was no mistaking the ruined face and the body that looked as if it had been pumped up on steroids. She knew ex- actly who Jesse meant when he talked about the 'evil one.' The man swept his eyes over the new prisoners, sending chills along Them's spine as his coal-black eyes lingered on her body. Jesse Nighthawk instinctively stepped back with the other villagers.

A brutish grin crossed the man's face as he saw the fear he in- spired. He uttered a guttural command. The guards shoved Thern, Ryan and Mercer out of the building and marched them through the woods. Therri was completely disoriented. She had no idea where the lake was. If by some miracle she had the chance to escape, she wouldn't know which way to run.

Her confusion was further compounded seconds later. They were moving along a paved path toward a thick stand of fir trees that barred their way like a dark and impenetrable wall. The fat trunks and thickly grown branches were a shadowy interplay of blacks and grays. When they were yards away from the nearest trees, a section of forest disappeared. In its place was a rectangle of blinding

white light. Therri shielded her eyes. When they adjusted after a moment, she saw people moving about as if she were looking through a door- way into another dimension.

They were herded through the door into an enormous, brightly lit space hundreds of feet across, and vaulted by a high, rounded ceil- ing. She looked behind her as the rectangle of forest vanished, and she realized that they had stepped into a building masked by a clever camouflage. While the structure itself was an architectural wonder, what caught their breath was the huge silvery-white airship that took up a good portion of the space inside the dome.

They gazed up in astonishment at the torpedo-shaped leviathan that was longer than two football fields. Its tail tapered down to a point that was surrounded by four triangular stabilizing fins, giving it a streamlined appearance despite its enormous size. Four massive engines in protective nacelles hung from struts below the belly of the aircraft. The airship rested on a complicated system of fixed and mov- able gantries. Dozens of men in coveralls swarmed around and over the airship. The air echoed with the sound of machinery and tools. The guards nudged the prisoners forward under the rounded nose of the airship, which loomed overhead as if it could crush them at any second. Therri had a fleeting image of what a bug must feel like just before a shoe comes down.

A long, narrow control cabin, ringed by big windows, was set into the aircraft's belly a short distance back from the nose, and they were ordered inside. The roomy interior reminded Therri of a ship, com- plete with its spoked wheel and binnacle. A man stood inside giving orders to several others. Unlike the guards, who all looked as if they had sprung from the same mold, he was tall and his skin looked as if it had been bleached. His head was shaved bald. He turned at the arrival of the prisoners and looked at them through dark sunglasses then handed off the electronic clipboard he was holding.

"Well, well, what a pleasant surprise. SOS to the rescue." He smiled, but his voice had all the warmth of a wind blowing off a gla- cier.

Ryan responded as if he hadn't heard the taunt. "My name is Mar- cus Ryan, the director of Sentinels of the Sea. This is Them Weld, our legal counsel, and Chuck Mercer, SOS operations director."

"There's no need to go through the routine of name, rank and se- rial number. I

know perfectly well who you are," the man said. "Let's not waste time. In the white-man's world, I go by the name of Fred- erick Barker. I'm called Toonook by my own people."

"You and these others are Eskimos?" Ryan said.

"Ignorant people call us by that name, but we are Kiolya."

"You don't fit the stereotype for an Eskimo."

"I've inherited the genes of a New England whaling captain. What started as a humiliating liability has enabled me to pass myself off in the outside world without question, to the benefit of the Kiolya."

"What is this thing?" Ryan said, glancing above his head.

"Beautiful, isn't it? The Nietzsche was secretly built by the Ger- mans to go to the North Pole. They planned to use it for commercial flight. It was all fitted out to take on passengers who would pay any- thing to fly aboard a real polar explorer. When it crashed, my peo- ple thought it was a gift from heaven. In a way, they were right. I've spent millions in restoration. We made improvements in the engines and their carrying capacity. The gas bags were replaced with new ones that can hold millions of cubic feet of hydrogen."

'I thought hydrogen went out with the Hindenburg,') Mercer said.

'German airships safely traveled thousands of miles using hydro- gen. I chose it because of the weight of my cargo. Hydrogen has twice the lifting power of helium. By the means of this simplest of atoms, the People of the Aurora Borealis will achieve their rightful destiny."

"You're talking in riddles," Ryan said.

"Not at all. Legend has it that the Kiolya were born in the aurora, which the Inuit tribes fear as a source of bad luck. Unfortunately, you and your friends will soon learn that this reputation is well-earned."

"You intend to kill us, don't you?"

"The Kiolya don't keep prisoners beyond their usefulness."

"What about the villagers?"

"As I said, we don't keep prisoners."

"Since we're doomed, why not indulge our curiosity and tell us where this aviation antique fits in."

A cold smile crossed the pale lips. "This is where the hero plays on the villain's vanity, hoping for the cavalry to arrive. Don't waste your time. You and your friends will live only as long as I need you."

"Aren't you interested in learning what we know about your plans?"

In answer, Barker said something in a strange language, and the leader of the guards stepped forward and handed him one of the C- 4 explosive packets that Mercer had carefully prepared. "Did you in- tend to do some mining?"

Ryan shot back. "Hell no! We planned to sink your operation like you did our ship."

"Blunt and to the point as usual, Mr. Ryan. But I don't think you'll get the chance to ignite your little July Fourth display," he said, his words dripping with contempt. He tossed the explosives to his hench- man. "And exactly what do you know about our 'operation'?"

"We know all about your experiments with biologically modified fish."

"That's only part of my grand plan," Barker said. "Let me explain what the future holds. Tonight, this airship will rise into the sky and head east. Its holding tanks will be filled with genetically modified fish in several species. It will spread my creations in the sea like a farmer planting seed. Within a few weeks and months, the native species will be wiped out. If this pilot project succeeds, as I expect it will, similar seedings will take place in all the world's oceans. In time, most of the fish on the world market will be those produced through our patented gene banks. We will have near-total monopoly."

Ryan laughed. "Do you really think this crazy scheme will work?"

"There's nothing crazy about it. Every computer model points to a resounding

success. The natural fish stocks are doomed from over- fishing and industrial pollution, anyway. I'm simply hastening the day when the oceans are turned into vast fish farms. Best of all, throwing fish into the sea isn't even against the law."

"Killing people is against the law," Ryan said, anger in his eyes. "You murdered my friend and colleague Josh Green."

Therri was unable to contain herself any longer. "Josh wasn't the only one. You killed the television reporter aboard the Sentinel. Your thugs shot one of your own men in Copenhagen. You murdered Ben Nighthawk's cousin and tried to kill Senator Graham. You're keep- ing people as slaves."

"The company lawyer has a tongue!" Barker's jaw hardened and the civilized tone he had been using turned into a snarl. "It's a pity you weren't around to argue the case for the Kiolya when they starved to death because the white men decimated the walrus. Or when the tribe was forced to leave its traditional hunting grounds, spreading throughout Canada, moving into the cities far from their homeland."

"None of that gives you the right to kill people or to mess up the

oceans for your own good," she said, with unrestrained fury. "You can terrorize a bunch of poor Indians and push us around, but you're going to have to contend with NUMA."

"I'm not going to lose any sleep over Admiral Sandecker's collec- tion of oddballs and geeks."

"Would you lose sleep over Kurt Austin?" Ryan said.

"I know all about Austin. He's a dangerous man-but NUMA re- gards SOS as an outlaw organization. No, you and your friends here are all alone. More alone than you have ever been in your life." Barker's tattooed henchman said something in the Kiolya language. "Umealiq reminds me that you wanted to see my pets."

With the guards taking up the rear, Barker led the way to a side door that opened to the outside. Moments later, they were back at the building where SOS had planted the explosive charges. Only this time, the interior was brightly lit up.

Barker paused in front of one of the tanks. The fish inside was nearly ten feet long. Barker cocked his head like an artist studying his canvas.

"I did most of my early work with salmon," Barker said. "It was comparatively easy to create giants like this. Although I actually came up with a fifty-pound sardine that lived a few months."

He moved on to the next tank. Therri sucked in her breath at the sight of the creature inside. It was a salmon, half the size of the fish in the first tank, but it had two identical heads on the same body. 'This one didn't turn out the way I planned. You must admit it's in- teresting, though."

The fish in the next tank was even more deformed, its body cov- ered with round lumps that gave it a repulsive, pebbled appearance. In another tank was a fish with bulbous, protruding eyes. The same deformities were repeated with other species, haddock and cod and herring.

"These are hideous," Ryan said.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Barker stopped before a tank that held a silvery-white fish about five feet long. "This is an early prototype I developed before I found that aggression and size were getting out of control in my experiments. I let some into the wild to see what happened. Unfortunately, they started to devour each other after they wiped out the local species."

"These aren't experiments, they're monsters," Ryan said. "Why do you let them live?"

"Feeling sorry for a fish? That's stretching it, even for SOS. Let me tell you about this fellow. He's very handy. We threw the body of the Indian into the tank along with your friend, and he stripped them down to the bone in no time. We let the other Indians watch, and they haven't given us an ounce of trouble since."

Ryan lost his cool and launched himself at Barker. He had his hands around the man's throat, when Barker's henchman grabbed the rifle from one of the guards and slammed the butt into Ryan's head. Therri was showered with blood as Ryan slumped to the floor.

Therri felt the coldness in the pit of her stomach as she recog- nized the source of the fear she had seen in Jesse Nighthawk's eyes. She heard Barker say, "If Mr.

Ryan and his friends are so concerned about their finny friends, maybe we can arrange dinner together later."

Then the guards closed in.

34

THE EUROCOPTER CARRYING Austin, Zavala, Ben Nighthawk and the two Basques lifted off the Navarras heli- copter pad and wheeled above the yacht in a big circle. Minutes later, the SeaCobra joined the circling chopper. Flying side by side, the choppers headed west toward the afternoon sun.

From his seat next to the pilot, Austin had a clear view of the Sea- Cobra's lethal silhouette pacing the Eurocopter a few hundred feet away. The combat helicopter carried enough weaponry to level a small city. Austin was under no illusions. Oceanus would be no pushover.

Cruising at a speed of one hundred twenty-five knots, the heli- copters soon passed over a rocky shoreline and left the sea behind them. They were traveling over a dense forest of fir trees, keeping a tight formation, hugging the treetops in the hope of avoiding detec- tion. Austin checked the load in his Bowen revolver, then he sat back in his seat, closed his eyes and worked through their plan in his head.

Zavala sometimes jokingly accused Austin of making things up as he went along. There was some truth to the charge. Austin knew planning could only go so far. Having grown up on and around the water, his views were colored by his nautical experiences. He knew that a mission was like sailing a boat into foul weather; when things went wrong, they really went wrong. A good sailor kept his lines clear and his bailing can handy.

He was a strong believer in the KISS principle. Keep It Simple Stupid. Since his primary goal was to get Ben's family and friends out safely, the SeaCobra couldn't just swoop down and blast away at everything in sight. Austin knew there was no such thing as a surgi- cal strike. The chopper's armament would have to be used sparingly, a fact which neutered its fearsome capability. He furrowed his brow at the wild card that fanatical idiot Marcus Ryan had dealt him.

Austin didn't need his fondness for Therri Weld to cloud his judg- ment.

The Eurocopter's engine changed pitch as the aircraft cut speed and came to a hover over the forest. Ben, who was sitting behind Austin with Zavala and the Aguirrez brothers, was signaling the pilot to descend. The pilot shook his head and insisted that there was no place to land.

Pablo glanced out the window. "Do you trust the Indian?" Austin checked the landing zone. Visibility was restricted, and he could see nothing but dark greenery in the lowering sun. They were now in Ben Nighthawk's backyard. "This is his country, not mine.

Pablo nodded, then barked in Spanish at the pilot, who muttered to himself and radioed the other helicopter of his plans to land. The SeaCobra peeled off and flew a back-and-forth pattern over the woods, using its infrared detectors to see if there were any warm bodies lurking in the vicinity. Detecting no sign of human life, the SeaCobra gave the okay to land.

The Eurocopter sank into the forest. No one except Ben would have been surprised to hear the rotors shred themselves in an unequal match with the sturdy tree trunks. But the only sound was a crackle and snap of thin branches and the soft thump of the skids hitting the around. Ben's sharp eyes had seen what the others had not, that what appeared to be thick forest was in reality a cleared area overgrown with heavy underbrush. The SeaCobra dropped down a short distance away.

Austin let out the breath he had been holding and jumped from the chopper with Zavala and the Aguirrez brothers right behind him. They ducked into a combat crouch with guns at the ready, de- spite the infrared sweep. As the rotors spun to a stop, a silence so com- plete that it seemed to have substance settled on them. Ben climbed out of the chopper and glanced at the upheld machine rifles.

"You won't find anyone here," he said. "This place hasn't been used since I was a kid. There's a river over there through the trees." He pointed to some ramshackle buildings that were barely visible in the dusky light. "That's the bunkhouse and the sawmill. It's a bad- luck place. My father said they had lots of accidents. They built a new camp downriver where they could float the logs to market quicker."

Austin had more temporal things on his mind. "The light's fad- ing. We'd better get moving."

They rounded up their rucksacks and broke into two groups. The NUMA men, Nighthawk and the Aguirrez brothers would be the assault group. The muscular Basques moved with an air of assurance that suggested they were no strangers to clandestine missions.

The two pilots, who were also heavily armed, would wait for a call to provide backup. Ben led the way into the forest, and they went from dusk to darkness the second they were under the trees. Each man except the last in line carried a small halogen flashlight, which they held beam-pointed-down as they followed Ben, who moved through the woods as silently and as swiftly as a woodland wraith. They traveled between a walk and a trot for several miles, making good time on the soft carpet of pine needles, until Ben finally called a halt. They stood in the piney darkness, panting with exertion, sweat pouring down their faces.

Ben cocked his ear, listening. After a moment, he said, "We're less than a mile away."

Zavala slipped the shotgun off his shoulder. "Time to make sure our powder is dry."

"Don't worry about the guards," Ben said. "They're all on the lakeside. Nobody would expect us to come in this way."

"Why not?" Zavala replied.

"You'll see. Make sure you don't get ahead of me," Nighthawk said, and without another word, he pushed on. Ten minutes later, Ben slowed his pace to a walk. Advising them to proceed with care, he brought the group to an abrupt halt at the edge of a chasm. Austin flashed his light on the steep vertical walls, then pointed it downward toward the sound of rushing water. The beam exhausted itself before reaching the river far below.

"I think I know why there are no guards on this side," Zavala said. "We took a wrong turn and ended up on the north rim of the Grand Canyon."

"This is called 'Dead Man's Leap,' " Ben said. "The people around here aren't very original when it comes to naming things." "They make their point well enough," Austin said.

Zavala looked to the right and the left. "Can we detour around this little ditch?"

"We'd have to travel another ten miles through thick forest," Ben said. "This is the narrowest point. The lake is a half mile from here." "I remember an Indiana Jones movie where they crossed a chasm on an invisible bridge," Zavala said.

"Ask and you shall receive," Austin said, as he removed his back- pack. He unsnapped the flap and pulled out a coil of nylon rope and a compact folding grapnel.

Zavala's eyes widened. "You never cease to amaze me, amigo. Here I was thinking I was well prepared because I brought a Swiss army knife with the corkscrew. I'll bet you have a bottle of fine wine in your little baggie as well."

Austin produced a pulley and rappelling harness. "Before you nominate me for a Boy Scout merit badge, I should confess that Ben told me we'd have to cross this moat before we scaled the castle walls."

Austin warned everyone to give him room. He stepped danger- ously close to the rim, whirled the grapnel over his head and let it fly. The first try fell short and clanged against the chasm wall. Two other tosses landed on the other side but failed to hook on. On the fourth throw, the hooks wedged into a cleft between some rocks. Austin be- layed the other end of the rope to a tree and tested his weight to see if the grapnel would hold. Then he attached the pulley and rappelling harness to the rope, took a deep breath and stepped out into space.

By the time he reached the other side, he seemed to be moving at Mach 2. A clump of bushes cushioned his landing. Using a retrieval line, Zavala pulled the pulley back, attached Austin's backpack and sent it over. After the rest of their gear was transported the same way, Zavala and Ben made the next crossing, then the two Basques followed.

They gathered up their packs and kept on moving through the woods until they began to see will-o'-the-wisp lights sprinkled among the trees like the campfires of a gypsy encampment. They could hear the muffled sounds of machinery.

Ben brought them to a halt. "Now you can worry about the guards," he whispered.

Zavala and the Basques slipped their weapons off their shoulders and Austin

loosened the flap on his belt holster. He had studied the satellite photos of the complex, trying to glean the layout as best he could even without the dome. Ben had helped fill in the gaps.

The zeppelin dome lay a short distance from the lake, surrounded by a network of paved walkways and roads that connected several smaller buildings hidden in the woods. He asked Ben to take him to where he saw the dome. While the others waited, the Indian led the way through the woods to the edge of a tarmac path that was lit by low-intensity, ankle-high lights. Seeing that the way was clear, they quickly crossed the tarred path into another patch of woods.

At one point, Ben stopped, then raised his hands like a sleepwalker and began to move toward the trees barring their way. He stopped again and whispered for Austin to do the same. Austin followed with arms outstretched until his hands were about to touch the shadowy tree trunks. But instead of rough bark, his palm encountered a smooth, cold surface. He put his ear against the exterior and heard a low humming. He backed off and saw the tree trunks again. Adap- tive camouflage has a great future, he thought.

He and Ben quickly retraced their path and rejoined the others. Austin suggested that they investigate the outbuildings. They would regroup in fifteen minutes.

"Don't take any wooden Eskimo pies," Zavala said, as he slipped away into the darkness.

Pablo hesitated. "What if we're discovered?"

"If you can do so quietly, neutralize anyone who sees you," Austin said. "If not, and all hell breaks loose, escape the way we came."

"What about me?" Ben asked. "You've done enough leading us here. Take a rest."

"I can't rest until my family is safe." Austin didn't blame Ben for wanting to find his family. "Stay close behind me." He drew his Bowen from its holster and waited until the others had melted into the darkness. Then he motioned for Ben to follow, and they struck off along the pathway, sacrificing the cover of the woods for speed.

They could hear activity from the direction of the lake, but the way was clear,

and before long, they came across a long, low building. It was unguarded.

"Shall we?" Austin said to Ben. They stepped inside. The build- ing was only a storage warehouse. They made a quick inspection and headed back to the rendezvous. Zavala showed up a few min- utes later.

"We checked out a warehouse," Austin said. "Did you find any- thing exciting?"

"I wish I hadnt Zavala said. "I'm swearing off fish and chips forever. I think I hit the Frankenfish mother lode."

' He described the strange, deformed creatures that he had seen in the building he'd investigated. It took a lot to disrupt Zavala's natu- ral calm, but from the tone of his voice, he was clearly rattled by the mutant monsters in the fish tanks. "Sounds like the things in your finny freak show constitute the prototype models," Austin said.

He stopped talking at a soft rustling in the woods. It was only Pablo returning. He said that he had found what looked like an empty garage. Inside there were signs of human habitation, scraps of food, slop buckets and blankets that might have been used to sleep on. He handed Austin an object that made Austin's jaw go hard. It was a child's doll.

They waited for Diego to appear, and when he did show up, they saw why he was late. He was bent low, carrying a heavy burden across his shoulders. He stood up, and an unconscious guard crashed to the ground. "You said to neutralize anyone who got in the way, but I thought this pig might be more useful alive."

"Where did you find him?"

"He was in a barracks for the guards. Maybe one or two hundred bunks. This thing was taking a siesta."

"Bet it's the last time he sleeps on the job," Austin said. He got down on one knee and flashed his light in the guard's face. The high cheekbones and wide mouth were indistinguishable from the other guards he had seen, except that he had a bruised forehead. Austin stood and unscrewed the top of a canteen. He took a sip, then poured water onto the guard's face. The heavy features stirred and the eyes fluttered open. They widened when they saw the guns pointed at his

head.

"Where are the prisoners?" Austin said. He held the doll out so the guard could see what he wanted.

The man's lips spread wide in a mirthless grin, and the dark eyes seemed to glow like fanned coals. He snarled something in an in- comprehensible language. Diego added a little persuasion, putting his boot on the man's crotch and placing the muzzle between the fierce eyes. The grin vanished, but it was clear to Austin that the guard was bound by a fanaticism that would withstand all the threats and pain that could be brought to bear.

Diego saw that he was getting nowhere, and switched around, putting his foot on the man's face and his gun jammed into the man s crotch. The man's eyes widened and he mumbled something in his language.

"Speak English," Diego said, and jammed the gun harder. The guard caught his breath. "The lake," he gasped. "In the lake." Diego smiled. "Even a pig wants to keep his cojones he said. He removed the gun, turned it around and slammed the butt down. There was a sickening hollow sound, and the guard's head lolled like that of the doll still clutched in Austin's hand.

Austin flinched, but he had no sympathy for the guard. He was too busy pondering the frightful possibilities for the prisoners. "Sweet dreams," he said with a shrug. "Lead the way," Pablo said.

"Since we're slightly outnumbered, this may be a good time to call in the reserves," Zavala said.

Pablo undipped the radio from his belt and ordered the SeaCo- bra pilot to hover a mile away. Austin tucked the doll inside his shirt. Then, with the others following, he hurried in the direction of the lake, determined to return the doll to its rightful owner.

35

WHEN THE GUARDS had burst into the garage prison brandishing truncheons, Marcus Ryan was huddled with Jesse Nighthawk. He had been probing the Indian's knowledge of the forest so that he could put together an escape plan. Ryan's hopes were dashed as the guards, at least two dozen of them, clubbed the

pris- oners at random. Most of the Indians were used to the sporadic beat- ings aimed to discourage resistance, and they cowered against the far wall. But Ryan was slow to move, and blows rained down on his shoulders and head.

Therri had been playing with a little girl named Rachael, when the door burst open and the makeshift prison was suddenly filled with shouts and swinging clubs. Rachael was about five years old, the youngest child in the group, and like many of the villagers, she was part of Ben's extended family. Therri stepped between one of the at- tackers and the little girl, and braced herself for the blow to come. The guard froze, confused at the unexpected show of defiance. Then he laughed and lowered his upraised club. He glared at Therri with pitiless eyes. "For that, you and the girl will go first."

He called out to one of his companions, who grabbed Therri by the hair. She was pushed facedown onto the floor, and a club was pressed across the back of her neck. Her hands were bound behind her back with wire that cut painfully into her wrists. Then she was pulled to her feet and saw Marcus and Chuck, whose heads were bloodied from the club blows.

When all the prisoners had been trussed like hogs, the guards herded them through the doorway and marched them through the woods. They walked through the woods for several minutes, until the dull sheen of the lake was visible through the trees. Although it seemed like several days, only a few hours had passed since they had been captured.

They were shoved into a shed near the lake and left alone. They stood in the darkened building, the children whimpering, the older people trying to comfort the younger ones with their stoic attitude. The fear of the unknown was even more torturous than being beaten. Then there was a commotion at the door, which opened to admit Barker, surrounded by a contingent of his inscrutable guards. He had removed his sunglasses, and Therri saw the strangely pale eyes for the first time. They were the color of a rattlesnake belly, she thought. Some of the guards carried blazing torches, and Barker's eyes seemed to glitter in the flickering light. His face was wreathed in a satanic smile.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said, with the geniality of a tour guide. "Thank you for coming. Within a few minutes, I will rise high above this place on the first phase of a journey into the fu- ture. I wish to thank you all for helping to get this project launched. To those of you from SOS, I wish you'd

been in my hands earlier, so that by the sweat of your labor you would come to appreciate the bril- liance of this plan."

Ryan had regained his composure. "Cut the crap. What do you in- tend to do with us?"

Barker surveyed Ryan's bloodied face as if he were seeing it for the first time. "Why, Mr. Ryan, you're looking a little rumpled these days. Not your usual blow-dried self."

"You haven't answered my question."

"To the contrary, I answered it when you were first brought to me. I said you and your friends would remain alive as long as I found you useful." He smiled again. "I no longer find you useful. I'm having the air dome lit up for your entertainment. It will be the last thing your dying brain will record."

The words chilled Therri to the bone. "What about the children?" she said.

"What about them?" Barker's icy gaze swept the prisoners as ifj

surveying cattle being led to slaughter. "Do you think I care for any one of you, young or old? You are nothing more to me than snow- flakes. You'll all be forgotten once the world learns that an insignif- icant Eskimo tribe controls a significant portion of the ocean. Sorry I can't stay. Our timetable is very precise."

He spun on his heel and disappeared into the night. The prison- ers were rounded up and herded outside and toward the lake. Mo- ments later, their steps echoed on the long wooden pier. The dock was in darkness, except for the lights on what looked like a barge, only with a catamaran hull. As they moved closer, Therri saw that a con- veyor belt, flush with the deck, led from a bin in the bow to a wide chute at the stern end. She surmised that the strange craft must be used as a moveable feeding station. The feed went into the bin, and was transported via the belt and dumped into the fish cages through the chute. An awful thought came to her, and she yelled a warning:

"They're going to drown us!"

Marcus and Chuck had seen the barge as well, and at her words, they struggled against their captors. All they got for their trouble were club blows that took the

fight out of them. Rough hands grabbed Therri and pushed her onto the barge. She stumbled and crashed onto the deck. She managed to twist her body so that she didn't come down face first on the hard surface, and most of the shock was absorbed at great painful cost by her right arm. Her knee hurt like hell, too. She didn't have time to dwell on her injuries. Duct tape was slapped across her mouth so she couldn't cry out. Then her ankles were bound, a heavy weight was tied onto her wrist bindings, and she was dragged along to the end of the barge and stretched crosswise across the belt.

She felt another, smaller body against hers. She looked over, and to her horror she saw that the next victim in line was Rachael, the lit- tle girl she had befriended. Then came the SOS men and the other prisoners. The preparations for multiple murder went on until all the prisoners were laid across the belt like cordwood. Then the barge's inboard motors rumbled into life.

The lines were cast off the pier and the barge began to move. Therri couldn't see where they were going, but she managed to turn to face the child and tried to comfort the girl with her eyes, although she was sure they were filled with terror. In the distance, she could see the light from the dome rising above the trees, as Barker had promised. She vowed that if she ever got the chance, she would kill him personally.

The motors went for only a short while, then they cut out and there was the splash of an anchor in the water. Therri struggled against her bindings, to no avail. She tensed, preparing for the worst. It came a minute later, when the motor that powered the conveyor belt started. The belt began to move, carrying her closer to the lip of the chute and to the cold dark water beyond.

36

AUSTIN HAD LED his ragtag assault group through the woods, skirting the darkened plaza, using the dimly lit footpath visible through the trees as a rough guide. He moved slowly and with great deliberation, making sure his path was free of twigs and branches before he put his full weight on his advancing foot.

The slow pace was maddening, but while they had seen no one since encountering the guard, Austin had the creepy feeling that they were not alone. His instincts were vindicated when the airship dome lit up like a giant lightbulb and a low roar arose from the plaza.

Austin and the others froze like living statues. Then a delayed re- action set in and they hit the ground belly-first, their weapons cocked and ready to repel an assault. The hail of bullets they expected never came. Instead, the roar grew in intensity and volume and flowed around them in a vast rushing river of sound. The noise came from the mouths of hundreds ofKiolya men, their broad, upturned faces cast in bluish light, zombie eyes transfixed on Barker, who stood on a raised dais in front of the dome.

Then came the monotonous chorus of a dozen tom-toms ringinp- in the plaza, and the crowd began to chant:

"Toonook... Toonook... Toonook..."

Barker bathed in the adulation, letting it wash over him, drink- ing it in as if it were an elixir before he raised his arms to the sky. Then the chanting and the drumbeat stopped as if a switch had been pulled. Barker began to speak in a strange tongue that had its origins beyond the far reaches of the aurora borealis. He started speaking slowly, his voice growing in power.

Zavala crawled up beside Austin. "What's going on?"

"Looks like our friend is having a high school pep rally."

"Ugh. Those cheerleaders wouldn't win any beauty contests," Zavala said.

Austin stared through the trees, mesmerized by the barbaric spec- tacle. As Ben had said, the dome actually did resemble a huge igloo. Barker was doing them a favor by whipping his gang of cutthroats into a murderous frenzy. With all its attention focused on their leader, Barker's private army would hardly notice a handful of intruders sneaking through the woods. Austin scrambled to his feet and sig- naled to the others to do the same. Crouching low, they made their way through the forest until at last they broke into the open at the edge of the lake.

The area around the dock seemed to be deserted. Austin assumed that all of Barker's men had been summoned back to the big igloo for their leader's command performance. He wasn't about to take any chances, though. The shed near the dock was large enough to har- bor dozens of assassins. He edged along one side of the building and peered around the corner. The shed's twin doors facing the water were wide open, as if the last person out had been in a hurry.

With Zavala and the Basques keeping watch, Austin stepped in- side and flashed his light around. The shed was empty, except for some lines, anchors, buoys and other boating paraphernalia. After a quick glance around, he was about to leave, when Ben, who had fol- lowed him inside, said, "Wait."

The Indian pointed to the concrete floor. All Austin saw were mounds of dirt tracked in by those using the building. Ben got down on one knee, and with his finger, traced the small footprint of a child. Austin's eyes hardened, and he strode back outside to find Zavala and the Aguirrez brothers staring at some lights that were moving in the lake. Austin thought he heard the sound of a motor. He couldn't be sure, because the sound of Barker's voice was still being carried on the wind. He reached into his pack and pulled out a pair of night- vision goggles, which he put to his eyes. "It's some sort of boat. Square-built with low sides."

He handed the goggles to Ben, who peered through the lenses and said, "That's the catamaran I saw the first time I was here."

"I don't recall you mentioning it."

"Sorry. There was so much happening that night. When Josh Green and I brought my canoe in, we saw it tied up to the dock. Didn't seem important at the time."

"It could be very important. Tell me about it."

Ben shrugged. "I'd say it was more than fifty feet long. Kind of a barge, but with a catamaran hull. A conveyor belt a couple of yards across ran down the center from a big bin at the bow back to the stern, which slopes down. We figured it was used to feed the fish."

"Feed the fish," Austin murmured.

"You remember what I told you about the fish cages I saw."

Austin wasn't thinking about fish in cages. Ben's words had con- jured up the Mafia cliche associated with concrete overshoes and a trip to the bottom of the East River. He cursed as he recalled the nasty habit that had got the Kiolya in trouble with its neighbor tribes. Barker had cooked up a mass human sacrifice to go along with his send-off.

Austin trotted to the end of the dock. He stopped and squinted through the night-vision goggles again. With Ben's description run- ning through his mind, he had a better understanding of what he was seeing. The low-slung craft was moving slowly and had almost reached the middle of the lake. In the illumination cast by the run- ning lights, he could see people moving around the deck. He couldn't tell what they were up to, but he had a good idea.

Pablo had followed him. "What is it?" he said, looking out at the lights reflected in the water.

"Trouble," Austin replied. "Call in the SeaCobra."

Pablo undipped the radio from his belt and barked an order in Spanish.

"They're on their way," he said. "What do you want them to do when they get here?"

"Tell them to thaw out that big igloo for starters."

Pablo smiled and relayed the order.

Austin called Zavala over and they talked briefly. While Zavala set off along the pier, Austin got the others together. "I want you to head for Ben's village on the far side of the lake. Wait for us there. If things get too hot after the fireworks start, lose yourselves in the woods."

"Are those my people out there on the barge?" Ben said anxiously.

"I think so. Joe and I will take a closer look."

I want to go.

"I know you do. But we're going to need your knowledge of the forest to get us out of here." Seeing the stubborn set to Ben's jaw, he added: "The danger to your people becomes greater with every sec- ond we spend talking."

The rumble of a motor came from where Zavala had been at work on one of the boats tied up at the dock. Barker's men had taken no chances after Bens last visit, and there were no keys left in the igni- tion, but Zavala could take a marine engine apart in his sleep. Mo- ments later, the husky power plant of a Jet Ski could be heard purring. Zavala came back to where the others were standing. "I knew my Swiss army knife would come in handy," he said.

Austin glanced anxiously out into the lake, then climbed down from the pier onto the Jet Ski. Zavala got on behind to ride shotgun, literally. Austin pushed off from the pier and twisted the throttle, and seconds later, the Jet Ski was scudding across the lake at fifty miles per hour in pursuit of the distant lights.

Austin was ambivalent about personal watercraft. They were noisy polluters with no purpose beyond disturbing beachgoers, wildlife and sailboats. At the same time, he had to admit, riding a Jet Ski was like tearing around on a waterborne motorcycle. Within minutes, he could see the outlines of the catamaran without the use of the night goggles. The barge seemed to have stopped. Those aboard the craft heard the sound of the fast-approaching watercraft and saw the foamy rooster tail it was creating in its wake. A spotlight blinked on.

Temporarily blinded by the bright light, Austin ducked low over the handlebars, knowing that his reaction came too late. He had hoped to get close to the barge before being discovered. Even the shortest glimpse of his Caucasian features and pale hair would have identified him as a stranger, and by definition, as the enemy. He put the Jet Ski into a sharp turn that kicked up a wall of foam. The light found them within seconds. Austin swerved in the opposite direction, not knowing how long he could keep up the water acrobatics, or even if the slalom turns would do any good. He yelled over his shoulder.

"Can you douse that light?"

"Keep this thing steady and I will," Zavala shouted back.

Austin obliged by slowing the Jet Ski and putting it broadside to the catamaran. He knew he was giving those on board an easy shot but felt he had to risk it. Zavala raised his shotgun to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The gun boomed. The light stayed on, and the beam found them again. Ears still ringing from the first blast, Austin felt rather than heard the second shot. The light blinked out.

The men on the boat broke out their flashlights. Soon, thin beams probed the darkness, and Austin could hear the rattle and snap of small-arms fire. By then, he was outside the range of the lights, keep- ing the Jet Ski at a low speed so its wake wouldn't be so obvious. They could hear the bullets ripping up nearby sections of water. The cata- maran had pulled anchor and was moving again.

Austin was certain that the encounter had not delayed the evil task of those on board, but only hastened it. He suspected that if he tried to pull the boat over like a traffic cop, he and Zavala would end up with more holes than a sieve. Precious seconds went by as he scoured his brains. He recalled what Ben had said about the cata- maran, and an idea came to him. He outlined his plan to Zavala. 'I'm starting to worry," Zavala said. 'I don't blame you. I know it's risky."

'You don't understand. I like the plan. That's what worries me." 'I'll make an appointment with a NUMA shrink when we get back. See if you can soften up the opposition in the meantime."

Zavala nodded and leveled his shotgun at a figure of a man who had the bad judgment to stand where he was silhouetted by the run- ning lights. The shotgun thundered and the man threw his arms up and disappeared from view like a duck in a shooting gallery.

Austin throttled up, and seconds later, when a fusillade from the boat lacerated the surface of the lake, he was well away from the spot. The shotgun thundered and another body toppled over. The men aboard the barge finally figured out that they were easy targets and doused the running lights. It was exactly the reaction Austin had counted on.

The catamaran was starting to pick up speed. Austin ran the Jet Ski parallel to the barge for a moment, then circled around until he was a couple of hundred yards astern. Eyes riveted on the twin wakes ahead, he accelerated the Jet Ski. He aimed directly off to one side of the stern and cut power at the last second.

The front of the Jet Ski hit the catamaran's stern with a loud and hollow thump, then the watercraft made a horrible scraping noise as it slid up and onto the sloping deck. A crewman who had heard the approaching watercraft stood in the stern with his machine pistol at the ready. The Jet Ski's rounded bow slammed into his legs. There was the audible snap of bone, and he was catapulted halfway down the length of the deck. Zavala had rolled off before the Jet Ski had come to a stop. Austin dismounted and yanked the Bowen from its holster.

The Jet Ski had skidded so that it was sideways on the deck, of- fering them some protection. Austin drew a quick bead on a figure moving in the darkness and fired off a shot. He missed, but the muz- zle flash illuminated a horrifying sight. Bodies-he couldn't tell if they were alive or dead in the dark-were lined up crosswise on the conveyor belt and were slowly moving toward the stern, where they would slide down a chute into the lake.

He yelled at Zavala to cover him. The shotgun fired off three shots in rapid succession. From the screams at the other end of the boat, one or more rounds found their deadly mark. Austin bolstered his revolver, launched himself at the nearest struggling form and pulled it off the belt. Another, smaller body took its place on the nightmar- ish assembly line. Austin pulled it aside out of harm's way and saw that it was a child.

More bodies were coming at him. He wondered how long he could pull them to safety, but he was determined to try. He grabbed another by the legs. From the weight, he guessed that it was a man, and he grunted with exertion as he pulled him to safety. He had his hands around the ankles of another, when the belt stopped. He stood up. Sweat poured down his face, and he was breathing hard. He felt a twinge of pain from his old chest wound. He looked up and saw a figure holding a flashlight coming his way. The Bowen filled Austin's hand.

"Don't shoot, amigo," came the familiar voice of his partner. Austin lowered the Bowen. "I thought you were covering me." "I was. Then there was nothing left to cover you from. After I nailed a couple of guys, the rest of them jumped ship. I found the OFF switch on the belt controls."

The first body Austin had pulled from an almost certain death was making muffled sounds behind the duct tape. Austin borrowed the flashlight and found himself looking into the unmistakable gentian eyes of Therri Weld. He carefully stripped the duct tape from her mouth, then freed her hands and feet. She gave him a quick thanks, then freed the little girl who had almost been her companion in death. Austin handed over the doll, and the girl hugged it in a crush- ing embrace.

Working together, they quickly freed the others. Ryan beamed his smile at Austin and started to shower him with praise. Austin had had enough of the egotistic activist. He was angry at Ryan for get- ting in the way of the rescue and for risking Them's life. A wrong look from Ryan and he would have thrown him overboard.

"Just shut up for now," he said.

Ryan saw that Austin was in a no-nonsense mood, and he clamped his lips together.

The last prisoners were being freed, when Austin heard a boat motor. He grabbed for his Bowen, and he and Zavala crouched be- hind the rail. They heard the boat shut its motor down and bump against the hull. Austin stood and flicked on the light. The bull's-eye fell on the anxious face of Ben Nighthawk.

"Come ahead," Austin yelled out. "Everyone's okay here."

A look of relief crossed Ben's face. He and the Aguirrez brothers climbed onto the catamaran. Pablo was bent over and seemed to be having some problems moving, and the other men had to help him. The Basque's sleeve was stained with blood above the elbow.

"What happened?" Austin said.

Diego smiled and said, "While you were out here, some of the guards saw us taking their boat and wanted us to pay rent. We gave them what we had. Pablo was wounded, but we killed the pigs." He looked around the boat and saw at least three bodies. "I see you have been busy, too."

"Busier than I would have liked." Austin glanced toward the dock, where lights

were moving about. "Looks like you stirred up a hor- nets' nest."

"A very big hornets' nest," Pablo replied. He looked up at the thut- thut sound of a helicopter. "But we have stingers as well."

Austin saw a flitting shadow against the blue-blackness of the night sky. The SeaCobra had arrived in the nick of time. It flew like an arrow toward land. As it drew near Barker's complex, it slowed and, instead of unleashing the expected destruction on the igloo, went into a circle. It was searching for its target and not finding it. The igloo's camouflage had been turned on, and the huge building blended in with the dark forest.

It was a fatal moment of indecision. Searchlights illuminated the helicopter like a German bomber in the London blitzkrieg. Seeing that they had been discovered, the helicopter crew launched a mis- sile at the plaza. Too late. The missile smashed into the plaza and killed a handful of Barker's men, but at the same time, a streak of light shot upward. The heat-seeking ground-to-air missile couldn't miss at such close range. It zeroed in on the helicopter's exhaust. There was a brilliant flash of hot yellow and red light, and the chop- per fell in fiery, sizzling pieces into the lake.

It happened so fast that the people watching from the catamaran could hardly believe what they saw. It was as if the cavalry had come to the rescue, only to be wiped out in an Indian ambush. Even Austin who knew the tide of battle could turn in an instant, was in a state of shock, but he quickly got over it. There was no time to waste. Barker's murderous myrmidons could be on them within minutes. He called Ben over and told him to ferry those on board to land where they could hide in the woods.

Ryan came over and said, "Look, I'm sorry about all this, but I do owe you again."

"This one's on the house, but the next time you get into trouble, you're on your own."

"Maybe I can repay you by lending a hand."

"Maybe you can repay me by getting your butt out of here. Make sure Therri and the others make it safely to shore."

"And what are you going to do?" Therri said. She had come up behind Ryan.

"I intend to have a few words with Dr. Barker, or Toonook." She stared at him in disbelief. "Now who's being reckless. You're the one who scolded me for putting myself in needless danger. He and his men will kill you."

"You're not getting out of our dinner date that easily." "Dinner? How can you think about such a thing with all this in- sanity going on? You're crazy!"

"I'm quite sane, but I'm determined to get through a romantic meal for two without interruption."

Her face softened and a faint smile came to her lips. "I'd like that, too. So be careful."

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. Then he and Zavala pushed the Jet Ski back into the water. It had suffered a few dents and bul- let holes during the rescue assault on the catamaran, but the motor was in fine shape and Zavala had no trouble getting it running again. As Austin pointed the watercraft back toward the vortex of violence, he realized that he didn't know what he was going to do when he fi- nally met up with Dr. Barker. But he was certain he'd come up with something.

Austin and Zavala landed on the beach a few hundred yards from the dock and made their way back toward the plaza, where Barker had ad- dressed his gang of thugs. The plaza was empty. Many of the defend- ers had scattered into the forest when the helicopter attacked. Austin and Zavala made their way around a crater and several bodies.

With its electronic camouflage in use, the dome itself was invisi- ble, but light streamed from a slim rectangular opening in the forest where the portal had been left open. No one barred the way as Austin and Zavala stepped inside and got their first breathtaking glance of the huge silver torpedo that filled most of the hangar. Powerful flood- lights reflected off the zeppelin's shiny aluminum skin, leaving the perimeter of the dome in darkness. They slipped into the shadows and hid behind a scaffold on wheels, where they had a good view of the scene.

The men scurrying around the zeppelin, apparently making last- minute preparations for take-off, lent scale to the gigantic aircraft. Launch crews strained at the anchor lines like contestants engaged in a tug-of-war game. High

above, the dome's roof was slowly open- ing, and stars were visible through the gap. Austin ran his eyes along the zeppelin's length, coolly taking in every detail, from the blunt nose to the tapering tail, his gaze lingering for a second on the tri- angular top fin and the word Nietzsche. The airship was a beautiful example of form following function, but aesthetics were secondary in his mind.

The control cabin was only a few feet above the floor, but it was surrounded by guards. He surveyed the airship again and saw what he was looking for. He pointed to the nearest engine nacelle and quickly outlined his idea to Zavala, who nodded and gave him the okay sign, signifying he understood. Zavala radioed Diego that they were boarding the airship. The roof opening was almost big enough to let the airship through. In another few seconds, the launch crews would begin to let up the slack on the anchor lines.

The zeppelin rested on tapering supports that resembled old- fashioned oil derricks. Other towers were arranged closer to the air- craft. With Zavala close on his heels, Austin made his way from tower to tower, finally reaching two scaffolds that supported the star- board rear nacelle. He glanced around. The crews were still intent on keeping the zeppelin down as it strained against the anchor lines. Satisfied that they had not been seen, he climbed to the top of the tower.

The egg-shaped engine housing was about the size of an SUV and attached to the fuselage by metal struts. The spinning propeller was the height of two men. Austin grabbed onto a strut and pulled him- self onto the top of the nacelle. He could feel the vibration from the powerful engine through the soles of his boots. As the propeller picked up speed, it created a backwash, and he had to hold on tightly to prevent being blown off. He reached down to lend a hand to Zavala, who was still scrambling onto the engine housing, when the launch crew slacked the lines and the zeppelin began to rise. Zavala's legs dangled as he tried to get a foot up on the rounded side of the nacelle. Holding on with one hand, Austin used the considerable strength in his shoulders to give Zavala the lift he needed.

By then, the zeppelin was halfway to the roof. From their position atop the nacelle, they were shielded from eyes below. But the prop wash was picking up, and it was becoming harder to hold on to the slick, rounded surface. Austin looked up and saw a rectangular open- ing where the struts disappeared into the fuselage. He yelled at Zavala, but his words were blown away by the wind, so he simply pointed. Zavala answered, and although Austin couldn't hear his partner's

reply, he was sure Joe was saying, "After you."

Austin began to climb. The strut had been made with ladder rungs to allow an engineer access to the engine pod for midair repairs. With the prop turning and the zeppelin rising, the journey of several feet was the ultimate challenge. Austin's progress wasn't pretty, but he made it through the rectangular opening in the zeppelin's belly.

Once out of the main force of the prop wash, he hung on the lad- der and looked back. Zavala was right behind him. The zeppelin had risen through the top of the dome, and the doors in the roof were closing. The people in the dome looked to be the size of ants. By the time Zavala made it into the fuselage, the dome was closed completely. Having made their decision to stow away, he and Zavala had no other choice. They began to climb into the darkness.

37

THE NIETZSCHE WAS a miracle of aeronautical design. Twice as long as a Booing 747 Jumbo Jet, it had been built in an age before computers and space-age materials. The Nietzsche had been modeled after the Graf Zeppelin, the 776-foot-long silver cigar built in 1928 by airship pioneer Hugo Eckener, but innovations that would later be part of the Hindenburg had also been incorporated into the design. In the Graf, passenger quarters were behind the control room. But the Nietzsche had been designed with living space within the fuselage itself.

Once inside the fuselage, Austin and Zavala found themselves in a small room, after their perilous climb from the nacelle. Hanging on the wall were machinists' tools and spare parts and long black leather coats like those favored by aviators of a bygone era. The room was unheated, and the coats would come in handy for those who worked there. Austin tried a coat on and found that it fit.

"You look like the Red Baron," Zavala said.

Austin slipped a leather cap down on his head. "I prefer to think of myself as a master of disguise." Seeing the skepticism in his part- ner's face, Austin said: "Maybe you've noticed that we're somewhat different in appearance from the Eskimo gentlemen we've seen on this little adventure. If these ridiculous outfits give us a second's edge, they might be worth it."

"The sacrifices I make for NUMA," Zavala said, searching for a coat that fit him.

The room's single door opened onto a long corridor. The walls of the plushly carpeted passageway were decorated with fanciful scenes of men in top hats flying a variety of odd-shaped hot-air balloons and flying machines. Antique crystal lamps hung from the ceiling. At the end of the corridor was a passenger area of comfortably appointed staterooms, each with two berths and its own unique pattern of flow- ery wallpaper.

A short walk led to an elegant dining salon. There were about a dozen small rectangular tables, each covered with a white tablecloth, neatly creased napkins set in place. Two upholstered chairs with ma- hogany arms and legs were pulled slightly back from each table, as if guests were to arrive momentarily.

Tall curtained windows would have given the diners a God's-eye view of the world below. Next to the dining room was a lounge, complete with bar and bandstand, and a dance floor of highly pol- ished wood. Like the dining salon, the lounge was decorated in Art Deco motif. Geometric patterns prevailed. The wall behind the bar was an art gallery ofzeppelin photos.

The lounge was hushed except for the muted rumble of engines.

Zavala looked around in wonder. "This is like being on an old ocean liner."

"Just pray that it isn't the Titanic," Austin said.

Austin led the way toward a room furnished with leather sofas and chairs. His knowledge of German was limited, but he guessed that the sign on the wall designated the area as the smoking room. They left the room and followed another corridor that led to an expansive space that seemed to be a work area. They could see a large functional table illuminated by halogen lamps, computers and several chairs that were designed more for function than comfort. Part of the room was in shadow. Austin found a wall light switch and flicked it on. The entire room was flooded with light, and both men tensed when they discovered that they were not alone. Two figures stood against the far wall, and Zavala swore in Spanish. Out of the corner of his eye, Austin saw the shotgun coming to bear.

"Wait!" he said.

Zavala lowered the gun and smiled as he studied the figures. He was looking at the mummified bodies of two men, propped up on metal stands. They stood in a natural position, arms hanging down by their sides. Their skin was as dark as leather and stretched tightly against their skulls. The eye sockets were empty, but the faces were remarkably well preserved. Austin and Zavala moved in for a closer look.

Zavala said, "I don't think these guys are the Blues Brothers."

"I don't think they're brothers at all. Judging from their clothing, I'd say they come from different eras."

One man was dressed in a heavy shirt and leggings of coarse ma- terial. His dark hair hung down to his shoulders. The taller man had short blond hair and wore a pro-World War II leather coat, not unlike the ones Austin and Zavala were wearing. Hanging above the mummies was a large, ragged-edged piece of aluminum. The word Nietzsche was printed on it.

Next to the mummies was a glass display case like those found in museums. Inside the case were a Leica 35mm still camera and sev- eral lenses, a Zeiss movie camera, charts of the northern hemisphere and a leather-bound book. Austin opened the case and leafed through the pages of the book. It was filled with entries in German, stopping in 1935. He stuffed the book into his pocket. He was examining a dis- play of Eskimo harpoons and knives, when Zavala called him over.

"Kurt. You've got to see this."

Zavala had wandered over to the long ebony chest that rested on a waist-high platform. On top of the chest was a horn that looked as if it had been made from an elephant's tusk. The instrument was studded with gems and banded in gold. Austin carefully removed the horn and handed it to Zavala, who marveled at the detail of the bat- tle scenes carved into the ivory.

Austin opened the chest and pushed back the lid. Lying on pur- ple velvet inside the chest was a sword in its scabbard. He lifted the leather scabbard from the chest and inspected the gold-clad hilt and hand guard. Set into the heavy triangular pommel was a huge ruby. The elaborate hand guard was etched with flowers. He mused at the incongruity of the beautiful decoration on a weapon with such deadly potential.

He hefted the two-edged sword, feeling the perfect balance, then gingerly drew the weapon from the scabbard. An electric thrill seemed to run through his arm. Could this be Durendal, the fabled weapon that Roland swung against the Saracens? The blade was chipped here and there. A picture flitted through his mind of Roland banging the sword against a stone so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of the enemy.

Zavala whistled. "That thing must be worth a fortune." Austin thought about all the time and money Balthazar Aguirrez had expended in his search for the object in his hand. "It's worth a lot more than that," he said.

He removed his coat and buckled the scabbard around his waist. He took a few steps as an experiment and found that the scabbard slapped against his leg. The thick leather belt hindered access to his revolver holster as well. He tried another position, slipping the scab- bard belt over his shoulder so that the sword hung down by his left side. Then he got back into his coat.

"Planning to do some fencing?" Zavala said. "Maybe. You must admit it beats your army knife." "My knife has a corkscrew," Zavala reminded him. "What about the overgrown bugle?"

"We'd better put it back. I don't want to advertise the fact that I've absconded with the toothpick under my coat."

They carefully replaced the horn the way it was found and moved to the other side of the room, where a map of the world was spread out on the worktable. Austin bent over the map and saw that coastal areas on all the continents were blocked out in red pen. Noted next to each red section was a date and a listing of various species offish. A large star marked the lake site where they had boarded the airship. He drew his finger from the star along a pencil line due east into the North Atlantic. The notation above the line was that day's date.

He straightened and said, "We've got to stop this ship before it gets to the Atlantic. This isn't a test run."

"Fine with me. I might point out that this thing is almost a thou- sand feet long and full of heavily armed thugs who might have other ideas."

"We don't have to take over the whole ship, just the control cabin.'

"Why didn't you say so? It's as good as done."

"Think you can fly this old gasbag?"

"Can't be that hard," Zavala said. "You hit the throttle and point the nose where you want to go."

Despite the casual reply, Austin never doubted Zavala's words. His partner had hundreds of hours under his belt flying practically every aircraft built. Austin tried to picture where they were in the zeppelin. He guessed that they were about midway along the length of the great airship. If they kept moving forward and down, they would come to the control cabin.

They left the room and its strange museum display and followed a maze of passageways totally unlike those they had encountered when they first came aboard. Their surroundings were newer and more functional. They came to a set of stairs leading down. Austin thought they had come to the control cabin, but he changed his mind when his nose picked up a whiff of brine and fish. He was reminded uncomfortably of his first breath inside the Oceanus fish nursery in the Faroe Islands.

He hesitated at the top of the stairs, drew his Bowen, and slowly descended into the blackness below. His ears picked up the sound of motors and bubbling aerators, further convincing him that his fish- nursery theory was correct. He was about halfway down the stairs, when the lights went on and he saw that he had more than biofish to contend with.

Dr. Barker stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at him, a cheerful smile on his thin face. His eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses.

"Hello, Mr. Austin," Barker said. "We've been expecting you.

Won't you join us?"

Any inclination to refuse Barker's offer was tempered by the sight of the stone-faced guards who surrounded the man, and the assault rifle muzzles pointed up the stairwell. The touch of a finger on even a single trigger would be enough to reduce Austin and Zavala to their basic molecules. Even more persuasive was the expression on the face of Barker's scarfaced henchman, who had tried on

several occa- sions to kill Austin. His liver-colored lips were stretched in a wide grin that told Austin he was still the top target in the man's sights.

"I would be a fool to refuse such a warm invitation," Austin said, as he descended the rest of the way.

"Now drop your guns and kick them over/' Barker said. Austin and Zavala did as they were told. The guards picked the weapons up. One man came over and frisked Zavala. Scarface stepped up to Austin and ran his hands roughly down the front of the leather coat.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you die," he growled.

Durendal seemed to glow red hot against Austin's ribs. "I know a dentist who could do wonders for your teeth," he said.

Scarface stopped his search and grabbed Austin's lapel in a chok- ing hold, only to back off at an order from Barker.

"That's no way to treat our guests," Barker said. Turning to Joe, he said, "You're Mr. Zavala, I presume?"

Zavala's mouth turned up slightly at the ends, and the softness of his dark brown eyes couldn't disguise the contempt in his voice. "And you're Dr. Barker, the mad scientist, I presume. Kurt has told me a lot about you."

"All good, I'm sure," Barker said. He seemed amused as he glanced back to Austin. "Are you gentlemen on your way to a cos- tume ball?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. If you don't mind, we'll be on our way/ Austin said.

"Don't run off so soon. You just got here."

"If you insist. We'd like to lower our hands, if you don't mind." "Go right ahead, but don't give my men an excuse to kill you on the spot."

"Thanks for the warning." Austin glanced around. "How did you know we were aboard, hidden surveillance cameras?"

"Nothing so sophisticated in this old relic. Purely as a safety meas- ure, we

installed sensors around the ship. A light in the control cabin indicated a change in air temperature in the starboard engine- maintenance room. When we went to investigate, we found the hatch open. We thought it was an accident until we noticed that the coats were missing."

"How careless of us." "It's the kind of carelessness that can get you killed. That was a dangerous way to come aboard. If you wanted a tour, we would have been glad to accommodate you."

"Maybe next time."

"There won't be a next time." Barker stepped forward and re- moved his sunglasses, revealing the pale eyes Austin had first seen at the Smithsonian reception. The irises were almost as white as the rest of his eyes and reminded Austin of a venomous snake he had once seen. "You and NUMA have caused me a great deal of trouble," Barker said.

"Your troubles are just beginning," Austin said.

"Brave words for someone in your position. But not unexpected. Umealiq was disappointed when you foiled his plans for you in Washington."

"Umealiq?" said Zavala, who was hearing the name for the first time.

"That's Scarface's real name," Austin said. "It supposedly means 'stone lance.' "

Zavala's lips curled in a slight smile.

"You find something humorous in the situation?" Barker said. "That's funny," Zavala said. "I thought it was Kiolyan for 'seal ma- nure/ "

Scarface's hand went to the ivory knife at his belt, and he took a step forward. Barker stopped him with an outstretched arm. He gazed thoughtfully at the NUMA men.

"What do you know about the Kiolya?"

"I know that the Inuit consider you to be the scum of the Arctic," Austin said.

Barker's bloodless face flushed scarlet. "The Inuit are in no posi- tion to judge.

They have let the world think that the people of the north are nothing but a bunch of blubber-chewing caricatures who run around in furs and live in ice houses."

Austin was pleased to see that he could get under Barker's cold skin. "I've heard the Kiolyan women smell like rancid whale blub- ber," he said.

Zavala sensed the opening and joined in. "Actually, they smell worse," he said. "That's why these goons prefer their own male com- pany."

"Insult us all you want," Barker said. "Your feeble repartee is the ranting of the doomed. My men are a brotherhood, like the warrior monks of the past."

Austin's mind was racing madly. Barker was right. He and Joe could summon up every insult possible, but they were still two un- armed men against several well-armed guards. He would have to try to change the equation. It took some willpower to do so, but he yawned and said, "What about that tour you promised?"

"How rude of me to forget."

Barker led the way onto a raised catwalk running down the mid- dle of the chamber. The sound of bubbling water came from both sides, but the source of the noise was hidden by darkness. Barker re- placed the sunglasses on his head and gave an order to one of his men. A second later, the chamber was flooded in a blue light that came from fish tanks on both sides and a couple of feet below the catwalk. The tanks were flush to the floor and were covered with sliding transparent plastic lids that allowed a view of the huge fish swim- ming inside.

"You look puzzled, Mr. Austin."

"Another miscalculation on my part. I thought your fish were being held at your coastal operation where they would have access to salt water."

"These are no ordinary fish," Barker said with pride in his voice. "They are designed to survive in salt or fresh water. The seed fish are improvements on the models I developed with Dr. Throckmorton. They are slightly larger and more aggressive than ordinary fish. Per- fect breeding machines. The airship will fly within feet of the ocean's surface, and they will slide down special chutes built into the belly of the zeppelin." He spread his arms the way he had done at his

pep rally. "Behold my creations. Soon, these beautiful creatures will be swimming in the sea."

"Where your monsters will create incredible havoc," Austin said.

"Monsters? I think not. I've simply used my genetic-engineering skills to produce a better commercial product. There's nothing ille- gal about it."

"Murder is illegal." "Spare us your pitiful indignation. There were many casualties before you came onto the scene. There will be many more obstacles to be removed." He crossed to the tanks on the other side of the fish hold. "These are my special pets. I wanted to see how large and hun- gry I could make an ordinary fish. They are too aggressive for breed- ing purposes. They are separated by sluice gates now so they don't at- tack each other."

At a word from Barker, a guard went over to a cooler and ex- tracted a frozen cod around two feet long. He slid back the plastic lid covering one of the tanks and tossed the carcass into the water. Within seconds, the cod disappeared in a bloody froth.

"I've made dinner reservations for you," Barker said.

"No thanks, we've already eaten," Austin said.

Barker studied the faces of the two men, but saw no sign of fear, only defiance. He frowned and said, "I'll give you and your partner time to think about your fate, to imagine what it feels like to be torn apart by razor-sharp teeth and scattered over the ocean. Our men will come for you shortly after we stop at our facility on the coast to re- fuel. Adieu, gentlemen."

Barker's men grabbed Austin and Zavala and hustled them down a corridor leading to a storage room. They were shoved inside, and the door was locked behind them.

Austin tried the lock, then found a seat on a pile of cardboard boxes.

"You don't seem very worried about being fed to the fishes," Zavala said.

"I have no intention of providing entertainment for that white- eyed freak and his cretinous henchmen. By the way, I liked your comment about Kiolyan women."

"It went against my grain. As you know, I love women of any kind. They have a lot to put up with, with their menfolk running around killing and sacrificing people. So, Mr. Houdini, how do we escape this little mess?"

"I guess we bust our way out of here."

"Uh-huh. And assuming we can get beyond that door, what chance do the two of us have against a battalion of armed men?"

"There are three of us, actually."

Zavala looked around. "An invisible friend, no doubt." Austin peeled out of his coat and drew the sword from its scab- bard. Even in the faint light inside the storage room, the blade seemed to glow. "This is my friend-Durendal7'

38

THE CATAMARAN CAME in like a marine landing craft, and the twin hulls slid partway onto the shore with a shriek of fiber' glass against gravel. The boat had no sooner come to a grinding halt than the people on board started to pile off. Ben Nighthawk was the first to hit the ground, followed by the Basques and the SOS crew. They helped the villagers climb down, and the group headed inland. Only Ben and Diego stayed behind.

Jesse Nighthawk turned and saw his son lingering on the beach. He shooed the other villagers into the woods and walked back to where Ben was standing.

"Why aren't you coming?" the old man said.

"Go on without me," Ben replied. "I've been talking to Diego. We have work to do."

"What do you mean? What sort of work?"

Ben looked across the lake. "Revenge." "You can't go back!" Jesse said. "It's too dangerous." Diego, who had been listening to the exchange, said, "The heli- copter pilots who were shot down were our friends. Their death can- not go unanswered."

"Those people killed my cousin," Ben said. "They beat and tor- tured my friends and family. They've raped our beautiful forest."

Jesse couldn't see his son's face in the shadows, but there was no mistaking the determination in Ben's voice. "Very well," he said sadly.

"I will see the others to safety."

Marcus Ryan emerged from the woods, trailed by Chuck Mercer and Therri Weld. "What's going on?" he said, sensing the somber at- mosphere.

"Ben and this man are going back," Jesse said. "I tried to stop them. They want to get themselves killed."

Ben put his hand on his father's shoulder. "That's the last thing I want to do, Pop. I can't speak for Diego, but at the very least, I want to wipe that big fake igloo off the face of the earth."

"That's a tall order for two men," Ryan said. "You'll need help." "Thanks, Mark, I know you mean well, but the others need you more than we do."

"You're not the only one who has a score to settle," Ryan said. His voice gained a steely edge. "Barker killed Joshua, and he sank my ship. Now he's trying to kill the oceans. I owe him big-time. That thing on the other side of the lake is no grass hut. You're not going to blow it down with a huff and a puff."

"We know that. We'll figure it out."

"You don't have time for trial and error. I know how we can send that dome into the stratosphere." Ryan turned to Mercer. "You re- member what we talked about?"

"Yeah, I remember. We said we could give Barker a big hotfoot if we got the chance."

"Well, Ben, how about it?" Ryan said. "Are we in?"

"It's not my decision alone." He turned to Diego.

The Basque said, "There are many of them and only a few of us.

Pablo is out of action. We would have to be very lucky merely to stay alive."

Ben hesitated. "Okay, Mark. You're in."

Ryan's mouth widened in a triumphant grin. "We'll need some ex- plosives. Our C-4 was taken away when we were captured."

"My brother and I have some hand grenades," Diego said, reach- ing over to tap his backpack. "Three apiece. Enough?"

In answer, Ryan glanced at Mercer, who said, "It could work if they're positioned in the right place."

"What can I do?" said Therri, who had been listening to the dis- cussion.

"Ben's people are in pretty tough shape," Ryan said. "They'll need your help, especially the kids."

"I'll do my best," Therri said. She kissed him and gave Mercer and Ben a peck on the cheek as well. "Take care of yourselves."

As Therri made her way back into the forest, Ben and the other men pushed the catamaran off the beach and climbed aboard. The boat's twin hulls and powerful motors gave it a respectable speed. They scudded over the surface of the lake and soon reached the op- posite shore. Pablo and Diego rode shotgun in the bow as the boat coasted up to the pier. They quickly tied up and headed inland.

Mercer made a stop at the boat shed and emerged with two reels of three-eighths docking line, some cord and a roll of duct tape. Walking single file, they detoured around the plaza. With Ryan in the lead, the group made its way undetected to the side of the dome.

Ryan found what he was looking for: a tall, cylindrical fuel tank lo- cated in a clearing surrounded by dense woods. Painted on the side was a warning that the tank contained highly flammable contents. A steel pipe about six inches in diameter ran from the tank to the side of the building. Next to where the pipe entered the airship hangar was a locked door. Like the dome itself, the door was made of a plas- tic material and easily gave way to the strength and determination be- hind Diego's shoulders.

Then he and the others stepped into a short passageway that ran parallel to the pipe for several yards. The conduit disappeared through a wall next to another door, this one unlocked. Ryan took the lead and opened the door a crack, giving him a view of the inte- rior of the airship hangar. Men milled around in the middle of the building, where the airship had been tied down. Others were coiling lines or moving gantries and scaffolding. A few guards were drift- ing out the hangar's main door.

Ryan motioned for the others to stay put while he and Mercer stepped into the hangar. They crawled along the wall behind tall stacks of coiled hose until they came to where the pipe entered the building. Barker had gestured toward the hose when he had ex- plained why he used hydrogen rather than helium to fill the airship's gasbags. A valve controlled by a large hand-turned wheel allowed the flow of gas into the hose. Ryan turned the wheel on the pipe until they could hear the hiss of gas escaping through the nozzle.

The escaping gas rose to the roof, where it wouldn't be detected, they hoped, until it was too late. With their work done, they slipped out the door and followed the passageway into the open. Ben and Diego had been equally busy. Following Mercer's instructions, they had taped the hand grenades onto the tank. Short lengths of cord had been attached to the safety-pin rings and ganged to the line from one of the spools. Ryan and Mercer inspected the work, found it satis- factory, then walked back to the lake, uncoiling the line behind them. They tried to run the line straight back to the lake, keeping it clear of bushes and trees where it could snag.

When they'd emptied one two-hundred-foot-long spool, they spliced the free end onto another spool. They were still a dozen yards short of the lake when that spool gave out, too. Mercer ducked into the boat shed and came out with several lengths and sizes of rope that they spliced together until the rope reached to the water's edge. When all was ready, Diego headed back to the plaza and took a position be- hind a thick tree.

With their work inside the hangar done, Kiolyan men were streaming out into the plaza, some of them heading in the direction of their barracks. The Basque coldly took a bead on a guard and let off a short burst. The man fell to the ground. More guards came running from the direction of the barracks and began to fire indis- criminately into the woods where they saw muzzle flashes, but

Diego moved after each kill and the bullets went far wide of their targets. When two more of their number were killed, the men in the plaza ran for the door of the giant igloo.

Diego had counted on exactly this reaction. He had tried to pick off the men who were making a break for the woods. The effect was to herd the guards into the "protection" of the structure. He knew that, given time, they would emerge from other exits in the dome and fan out into the woods and try a flanking maneuver. But as the last man disappeared into the airship hangar, leaving the plaza deserted, Diego was already sprinting back to the beach.

Waiting on shore, where he and the others had been alerted by the sound of gunfire, Ryan saw Diego running toward him and handed the end of the line to Ben.

"Would you like to do the honors?"

"Thanks," Ben said, taking the line. "Nothing would give me more pleasure."

Ryan turned to the other men. "When Ben yanks on that line, dive into the water and keep your head under for as long as you can. Okay, Ben. Let'er rip!"

Ben jerked hard on the line, then dropped it and dove with the others into the lake. They filled their lungs with air, then ducked below the surface. Nothing happened. Ryan poked his head out and swore. He sloshed out of the lake onto the beach, picked up the loose end of the line and gave it a tug. It tugged back as if caught on a branch.

"I'll check. Must be hung up on something," he called out to the others, and followed the line inland.

Ryan was only partly right. The line was snagged on someone, not something. A stray guard had seen Diego bolt for the lake and had gone over to investigate. He was holding the line in his hand when he saw Ryan approach from the beach. Ryan was bent low, his eyes following the line, and he never saw the man level his gun. The first sign that he was not alone was the impact of the bullet hitting him in the shoulder like a fiery hammer blow. He dropped to his knees.

The guard never got off another shot. Diego, who had been fol- lowing Ryan's trail, let off a burst that stitched its way across the guard's chest. The guard was

thrown back by the impact, but his fingers clutched the line in a death grip. Ryan watched through filmy eyes as the guard fell, his weight pulling on the line. An alarm sounded in his brain, cutting through the pain and confusion, and he tried to rise, but his legs were made of rubber. Then he felt strong hands lifting him to his feet and guiding him back toward the lake. They were almost at the water's edge, when the lake lit up as if it had been sprayed with phosphorescent paint.

When the guard had toppled over, the tug had been transmitted along the line to the grenade rings. They'd popped out, and the levers had gone flying, igniting the fuse train. Six seconds later, the grenades went off simultaneously. A millisecond after that, the hydrogen in the tank ignited. The fiery gas rushed along the short length of the pipe and exited through the nozzle as if it were expelled from the busi- ness end of a flamethrower. The spurting flames touched off the in- visible cloud of hydrogen hanging under the dome.

The airship hangar became a hell for the Kiolyan guards. Satu- rated with hydrogen, the superheated air exploded inside the dome, instantly incinerating flesh and bone. The dome contained the heat for only a few seconds, glowing white hot, before the thick plastic cells that formed the walls evaporated. But the delay before the final explosion of flames gave Ryan and Diego the time they needed. They gained the water's edge and dove into the lake as the dome exploded and sent out sheets of flame that vaporized the surrounding forest and outbuildings. Blistering waves of heat rippled out in every di- rection.

Hampered by his wound, Ryan had only taken a quick gulp of air before plunging into the lake, and his lungs were only partially filled. He saw the water light up and heard a muffled roar, and he stayed under for as long as he could before popping his head up. When he surfaced, thick smoke from the burning forest stung his eyes, but he paid no attention to the pain. He stared in awe at the mushroom cloud rising high in the sky from the field of orange-glowing embers that marked the place where he had last seen the dome. It made the Hindenburg explosion look like a candle flame.

Like otters coming up for air, Ben, Mercer and Diego stuck their heads out of the water and shared his wonder. Each of them had lost a friend or a relative to the schemes of Barker and his Kiolyan henchmen. But there was no smugness or satisfaction at the de- struction they had caused. They knew that justice had been only partially served. The mad geneticist had been hurt but not stopped. By the flickering light of the burning trees, they swam to the cata- maran, the three of

them helping Ryan through the water. Minutes later, the boat was moving across the water, leaving the smoldering funeral pyre in its wake.

39

AUSTIN SAT ON the box offish antibiotics, holding the sword blade between his knees, his head bent against the hilt. A stranger would have seen this pose as one of dejection, but Zavala knew better. Austin would act when he was ready.

Zavala was keeping himself occupied with a set of exercises that were part yoga, part Zen and part old-fashioned shadowboxing to loosen him up and focus his mind. He finished demolishing an imag- inary opponent with a left uppercut and a quick right cross, brushed his palms together and said, "I've just knocked out Rocky Marciano, Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali in quick succession."

Austin looked up and said, "Save some punches for Barker and his pals. We're starting to descend."

Austin had been gambling that Barker was telling the truth when he said that he intended to feed them to his so-called pets and dump what was left into the Atlantic Ocean. A murderer like Barker would resort to any form of violence and duplicity to achieve his goals, but his inflated vision of himself extended to his godlike pronounce- ments of life and death. If Barker said he would kill them over the Atlantic, he meant it.

Austin had been waiting for the refueling stop, hoping the zep- pelin's crew would be distracted as the great airship came in for a landing. The guards had taken the men's wristwatches, and it was impossible to keep accurate track of the passage of time. After see- ing that they were cut off from sight and sound, Austin had stuck the sword point into the floor and put his ear against the hilt. The sword picked up the engine vibrations like a stylus on a record player. In the last few minutes, the pitch had changed. The engines had slowed. He stood and walked over to the sturdy wood-paneled door. They had put their shoulders against it earlier, but all they had gotten for their trouble were bruises.

Austin knocked softly on the door. He wanted to be sure no guard was standing on the other side. When there was no reply, he gripped the sword hilt in two hands, lifted the blade over his head and brought it down, putting all the considerable strength in his thick arms behind the thrust.

The wood splintered, but the blade didn't go through the door.

Using the point, he pried off a section as big as his hand, then enlarged it. Working furiously, he opened a hole big enough to slip his arm through. The latch had been padlocked. After several more minutes, taking turns hacking at the wood with Zavala, they cut the latch off and pushed the door open. Seeing no guards, they cautiously made their way back to the fish hold. Austin leaned over the gangway.

"Sorry to disappoint you boys," he said to the milky shapes swim- ming around in the tanks, "but we have other dinner plans."

"They probably don't like Mexican food anyhow," Zavala said.

"Check out the water level."

The surface of the water was at a slant, indicating that the zeppe- lin was inclined at a forward angle. They were on their way down. Austin wanted to get into the control car but suspected it would be heavily defended. They would have to be more creative. Again he looked for an answer in Barker's psychotic personality. In his ram- bling discourse, Barker had revealed more than he should have.

"Hey, Joe," Austin said thoughtfully, "do you remember what our host said about the sluice gates?"

"They keep the more aggressive fish separated. Otherwise, his lit- tle pets would chew themselves to pieces."

"He also said that the systems on this gasbag are hot-wired. I'll bet that when the sluice gates are removed, an alarm goes off. How would you like to create a little chaos?"

Austin pulled up one of the gates. The fish on either side of the gate had come to the top of the tank, thinking that the presence of a human meant they were about to be fed. When the gate was re- moved, they all froze for an instant. Then their fins became a blur. There was a flash of silvery white and snapping jaws. Recalling the fate Barker had planned for them, Austin and Zavala watched the silent battle with a cold feeling in the pits of their stomachs. Within seconds, the tanks were filled with blood and fish parts. The creatures had ripped each other

to shreds.

A red light on the wall had started to flash when the gate was re- moved. Austin waited by the door while Zavala lounged on the cat- walk. He almost shouted for joy when only one guard showed up. The guard stopped short when he saw Zavala, and raised his rifle. Austin stepped up from behind and said, "Hello." When the guard turned, Austin jammed his elbow into the man's jaw. The guard crumpled to the floor like a sack of blubber. Austin scooped up the rifle and tossed it to Zavala. Then he found a switch that turned the alarm off.

With Zavala rearmed and Austin clenching his sword as if he were about to lay siege to a castle, they left the fish hold and followed a short corridor that led to a set of stairs going down to the control cabin. From their elevated vantage point, they could see through the open door. Men were moving about the cabin or were at the controls, but Barker wasn't among them. Austin signaled for Zavala to back away. The control cabin could wait. It made no sense to tangle with the claws and teeth of the monster called Oceanus when it might be easier to cut off its head.

Austin had a pretty good idea where he might find Barker. They hurried back through the fish hold and along a passageway until they came to the combination work area and museum where Austin had found Durendal. Austin's guess as to Barker's whereabouts was correct. The scientist and his scarfaced henchman were bent over the chart table.

With his animal instincts, Scarface sensed their intrusion and raised his head. He saw the two NUMA men, and his face contorted in an expression of savage fury. Barker heard his henchman snarl and looked up. After his initial surprise, he broke out in a smile. Austin couldn't see the eyes behind the sunglasses, but he could tell that they were fixed on the sword. Without a word, Barker went over and picked up the horn, then looked inside the chest.

"Well, well, Mr. Austin. It seems that you're a thief as well as a stowaway."

He closed the lid and went to replace the horn on top. But first he glanced over at Scarface, who replied with an almost imperceptible nod. Before Austin could move. Barker threw the horn at Zavala's head. Zavala ducked and the horn missed him by a few inches. Tak- ing advantage of the distraction, Umealiq dropped down behind the desk. With the agility of a cat, he gained the protection

of the heavy sofa. He popped up like an ugly jack-in-the-box, let off a wild shot from a handgun, then disappeared through a doorway.

"Get him before he alerts the others!" Austin shouted. But Zavala was already on his way.

Austin and Barker were left alone. With the smile still pasted on his ghostly face. Barker said, "Seems as if this is between you and me, Mr. Austin."

Austin returned the smile. "If that's the case, you're through." "Brave words. But consider your position. Umealiq will kill your partner, and within moments, armed men will come pouring through that door."

"Consider your position, Barker." He raised the sword and ad- vanced. "I'm about to cut your cold heart out and toss it to your mu- tant monsters."

Barker spun around like a ballet dancer, snatched a harpoon off the wall of the Eskimo display and, with a flick of his wrist, hurled it at Austin with amazing accuracy. Austin stooped to avoid the mis- sile. The harpoon buried itself in the chest of one of the mummies. The stand holding the mummified body in leather crashed over, pulling down the section of airship skin with the word Nietzsche on it. Barker snatched another harpoon off the wall and charged at Austin, with an ivory knife from the display in his other hand.

Austin lopped off the harpoon point with a quick swing of the sword, but the movement left him open. He stepped backward to avoid the knife and stepped on the horn, which was lying on the floor. His ankle buckled and he fell. Barker yelled in triumph and lunged. Austin had landed with the sword under him and couldn't bring it to a defensive position. The knife slashed down. Austin blocked Barker's wrist with the edge of his hand. He tried to grip it, but his palm was sweaty. He let go of the sword and brought his other hand around and used it to push the knife point away from his throat.

Frustrated by Austin's superior strength, Barker jerked his hand back and brought it up to strike again. Austin rolled out of the way, leaving the sword behind him. They both scrambled to their feet at the same time.

When Austin went to retrieve the sword, the knife slashed the air a few inches from his chest. Barker kicked the sword out of reach, then advanced on Austin. He stepped back and felt the edge of the desk behind him. He could go no

farther. Barker was so close, Austin could see his face reflected in the sunglasses. Barker smiled and raised his knife to strike.

Zavala had bounded through the doorway and stopped short. He expected to find himself in another corridor. Instead, he was in a small chamber, not much bigger than a telephone booth, with ladder rungs running up one wall. A single wall lamp lit the cramped space. Under the lamp was a flashlight rack. One of the lights was missing. He grabbed one of the remaining flashlights and pointed it up. He thought he saw a flicker of movement in its beam, then nothing but darkness. He slung the rifle over his shoulder, tucked the light in his belt and began to climb. The shaft opened onto a passageway con- structed in a triangle of interlocking girders. Probably part of a keel that kept the airship rigid and allowed access to its innards.

The keel intersected another passageway. Zavala held his breath and heard a slight ting that could have been made by a boot or shoe slapping against metal. He stepped into the new passageway and found that it curved up against the inside of the zeppelin's skin. The white fabric of the inflated gas bags was pressed tightly against the framework on the other side. He guessed that he was inside a ring that worked with the keels to give the airship further support.

His theory proved out, as the passageway began to curve back on itself, so that he was climbing directly over the huge bags. Zavala was in good shape, but he was panting heavily when, at the top of the zep- pelin, he came to another triangular passageway running lengthwise from the front to the back of the airship. The choice was easier this time. He pointed his light along the transverse support. He could see movement and hear heavy footsteps echoing in the distance.

Zavala dashed along the keel, knowing he had to stop Scarface be- fore he made it to the control car and raised the alarm. He came to another juncture where the transverse corridor intersected a sup- porting ring. There was no sign or sound of Scarface to reveal where he had gone. Zavala's mind assembled a picture of the inside of the great airship.

If he were looking at a clock, the corridor he was in would be in the noon position. The transverse passageway he had seen earlier was at eight o'clock. To keep the rings rigid, there must be a third horizontal passageway at four o'clock. Maybe he could cut Scarface off at the pass.

He descended the ring, half climbing, half falling. He almost shouted in exultation when he came upon the third transverse pas- sageway. He ran down the corridor, pausing at each ring to listen. He was guessing that Scarface would make his way as far forward as he could before descending to the control car using another ring.

At the third juncture of a keel and a ring, Zavala heard a ting-ting as someone climbed down the metal ladder. He waited patiently until he could hear heavy breathing. He flicked on the light. The beam caught Scarface clinging to the ladder like a large, ugly spider. Scarface saw that he'd been intercepted and began to climb up the ladder.

"Hold it right there!" Zavala ordered. He brought the shotgun to his shoulder.

Umealiq halted and looked down at Zavala with an ugly leer on his face. "Fool!" he shouted. "Go ahead and fire. You'll be signing your death warrant. If you miss me and hit a hydrogen bag, the air- ship will go up in flames and you and your partner will die."

Zavala's lips twitched at the ends. As an engineer, he was well- acquainted with the properties of various elements. He knew that hy- drogen was volatile, but unless he was using a tracer bullet, combustion was unlikely. "That's where you're wrong," he said. "I'd just end up punching a hole in the gas bag."

The evil smile vanished. Umealiq bent off the ladder and pointed his gun at Zavala. The shotgun boomed once. The heavy shell hit Umealiq squarely in his broad chest and knocked him off the ladder. Zavala stepped back to avoid the body that crashed to his feet. As his life ebbed, Umealiq's face was twisted in disbelief.

"That's something else you were wrong about," Zavala said. "I don't miss."

While Zavala was chasing Scarface, Austin had been fighting for his life. Again, he had thrown his left hand up so that the edge of it caught Barker's wrist and stopped the descending knife inches from his neck. With his right hand, he reached up to grab Barker by the throat, but the other man jerked back. Austin's groping fingers yanked off the sunglasses. He found himself staring into Barker's pale-gray snake-eyes. Austin froze for a second and lost his grip on the wrist. Barker jerked his arm back, prepared to make another thrust.

Austin reached back onto the desk, his fingers in a desperate search for a paperweight or something else he could use to brain Barker with. He felt a searing sensation. His hand had touched one of the halogen lamps that illuminated the map. He grabbed the lamp, brought it around and shoved it in Barker's face, hoping to burn him. Barker blocked the lamp, but he couldn't stop the light. It was as if Austin had thrown acid into Barker's light-sensitive eyes. He screamed and threw his hand in front of his eyes to shield them. He stumbled back, scream- ing in the Kiolyan language. Austin watched dumbfounded at the damage he had wrought with a single lightbulb.

Barker groped his way out of the room. Austin picked up the sword and went after him. In his haste to catch Barker before he could get back to the control car, Austin was less careful than he should have been, and Barker was waiting for him in the fish hold. He ambushed Austin from just inside the door, and his slashing knife caught the rib cage on the side opposite from his existing wound. Austin dropped the sword and tumbled off the gangway onto the plastic lids that covered the fish tanks. He felt a warm dampness soaking his shirt.

He heard a nasty laugh from Barker, who stood on the gangway visible in the blue glow from the tanks. He was looking up and down, and Austin realized with relief that he was still blind. Austin tried to pull himself along the top of the tanks. The creatures under the plastic stirred in the water as they saw him moving and smelled the blood. Barker jerked his head in Austin's direction.

"That's right, Mr. Austin. I still can't see. But my acute sense of hearing gives me a different kind of sight. In the land of the blind, the man with the best hearing is king."

Barker was trying to goad Austin into a fatal response. Austin was losing blood and didn't know how long he could stay conscious. Zavala could be dead. He was on his own. There was only one chance. He slid back the lid of the tank next to him, groaning to cover the noise.

Barker's head stopped like a radar antenna with a fix on its target. He smiled, his pale eyes staring directly at Austin.

Barker smiled. "Are you hurt, Mr. Austin?"

He took a few steps toward Austin on the catwalk. Austin groaned again and slid

back the top of the tank another few inches. Barker stepped off the catwalk and walked slowly along the tops of the fish tanks. Austin glanced at the opening. The gap was still less than a foot. He groaned again and brought it back another few inches. Barker stopped and listened as if he suspected something. "Screw you, Barker," Austin said. "I'm opening the sluice gates." Barker's face fell, and he let out a feral snarl and charged forward. He never heard Austin pull the lid back another foot-and then he had stepped into the tank. He sank out of sight, then his head bobbed back up to the surface. His face turned into a mask of fear as he re- alized where he was, and he clung to the edge of the tank and tried to pull himself out. The mutant fish in the tank had been startled by the intrusion, but now it was nosing around Barker's legs. It was

being excited as well by blood from Austin's wound that had seeped down into the water.

Austin rose to his feet and coolly pulled up the adjoining sluice gates. Barker was halfway out of the tank when the fish from the other tanks found him. His face turned even whiter, and then he slipped back into the tank. There was a flurry and commotion... and his body disappeared in bloody foam.

Austin turned off the alarm switch and staggered back to Barker's quarters, where he had found a medicine cabinet with a first-aid kit. Using tape and bandages, he stanched the bleeding. Then he re- trieved the sword and was about to follow Zavala to see if he could help him, when his partner stepped through the door.

"Where's Barker?" Zavala said.

"We had a disagreement and he went to pieces." Austin s lips tight- ened in a mirthless smile. "I'll tell you later. What about Scarface?"

"Fatal gas attack." He glanced around. "We might want to get off this thing."

"I was just starting to enjoy the ride, but I see your point."

They hurried forward to the control car. There were only three men in the cabin. One man stood in front of a spoked wheel at the forward end of the car. Another manned a similar wheel on the port side. A third, who seemed to be in command, was directing them. He went for a pistol in his belt when he saw Austin and Zavala enter the cabin. Austin was in no mood for fooling around.

He stuck the sword's razor-sharp blade under the commander's Adam's apple and said, "Where are the others?"

Fear replaced the hatred in the man's dark eyes. "They're manning mooring lines for the landing."

While Zavala kept him covered, Austin lowered the sword and went over to one of the gondola windows. Lines dangled from a dozen points along the length of the great zeppelin. The zeppelin's lights illuminated the upturned faces of the men who waited below to grab the lines and pull the airship down to a mooring tower. He turned and ordered the commander to take his men and leave the control car. Then he locked the door behind them.

"What do you think?" he said to Zavala. "Can you fly this an- tique.

Zavala nodded. "It's like a big ship. The wheel up front is the rud- der control. The one on the side controls the elevators. I'd better take that. It might require a gentle hand."

Austin stepped over to the rudder wheel. The zeppelin was angled forward, giving him a clear view of the scene below. Some of the mooring lines were in the hands of the ground crew.

He took a deep breath and turned to Zavala. "Let's fly."

Zavala turned the elevator wheel, but the zeppelin refused to rise.

Austin cranked the engine controls over to half speed ahead. The air- ship began to move forward, but the mooring lines were holding it down.

"We need more lift," Zavala said.

"What if we dump some weight?"

"That might work."

Austin scanned the control panel until he found what he was look- ing for. "Hold on," he said.

He punched the button. There was a gushing noise as the fish tanks emptied. Hundreds of wriggling fish and thousands of gallons of water poured out of the chutes under the airship and rained down on the men below. The ground crew scattered, releasing the moor- ing lines. Those men who didn't let go found themselves lifted in the air when the airship rose suddenly with the loss of ballast. Then they, too, dropped off.

The zeppelin moved forward and up until it was in the clear. Austin found that the rudder controls, as Zavala said, were not un- like those used to steer a ship. There was a delay before the great mass above their heads responded to the turn of the wheel. Austin steered the zeppelin out to sea. In the golden sparkle cast by the dawning sun, he could see the silhouette of a boat a few miles offshore. Then, he was distracted by a loud banging on the control-cabin door.

He yelled over his shoulder. "I think we've worn out our wel- come, Joe."

"I wasn't aware we'd ever had a welcome, but I won't argue with you."

Austin steered toward the boat, and when they were closer, he brought the engine speed down to SLOW. Zavala turned the elevator wheel so that the zeppelin would move up. Then they climbed through the windows and grabbed a couple of mooring lines. Austin had some trouble holding on because of his latest wound, but he was able to wrap his legs around the rope and control his descent fairly well. They started to rappel to the sea as the zeppelin began to regain altitude.

Paul had been standing watch a few minutes earlier when he heard the unmistakable sound of big engines. Something was going on in the air over the Oceanus facility. A minute before, beams of light had stabbed the sky. He saw a huge shadow, then lights were bounc- ing off the metallic skin of the airship. The airship turned seaward, gradually moving lower as it approached the boat.

He awakened Gamay and asked her to alert the rest of the crew. He was afraid Oceanus might have called in aerial support. The sleepy-eyed captain was on deck a moment later.

"What's going on?" he said.

Paul pointed at the approaching zeppelin, which glowed as if it were on fire from the golden rays of the new sun. "We'd better get moving. I don't know whether

that's a friend or enemy."

The captain was fully awake now. He ran for the bridge.

Professor Throckmorton was on deck as well. "Dear God," the professor said. "That's the biggest thing I've ever seen."

The engines growled and the boat began to move. They watched nervously as the airship cut the distance between them. It was mov- ing erratically, left and right, then its nose would go high and low. But one thing was clear, it was coming right at them. It was so low now that the lines dangling from below touched the waves.

Gamay had been focused on the control cabin. She saw heads ap- pear in the windows, then two men climbed out and slid down the ropes. She pointed them out to Paul, and a broad grin crossed his face.

The captain had returned to the deck. Paul told him to bring the boat to a stop.

"But they'll catch us."

"Exactly right, Captain, exactly right."

Mumbling to himself, the captain raced back to the bridge. Paul and Gamay grabbed some crew members and readied the vessel's inflatable outboard boat. The engines cut to an idle, and the boat plowed to a halt as the zeppelin's gigantic silhouette filled the sky. As the airship came abeam, the figures hanging from the lines dropped into the sea with two great splashes. The inflatable came alongside the heads bobbing in the waves. Paul and Gamay pulled Zavala and Austin aboard.

"Nice of you to drop in," Paul said.

"Nice of you to pick us up," Austin said.

Even as he grinned with pleasure, Austin was keeping an eye on the zeppelin. To his relief, after the airship leveled out, it steered on a course away from the ship. Barker's men must have broken back into the control car. They would have made short work of the boat and everyone on it with their automatic weapons. But the Kiolya were headless now, without Toonook, their great leader.

Within minutes, friendly hands were helping Austin and the oth- ers back onto the research vessel. Austin and Zavala were taken below and provided with dry clothes. Gamay did a professional job patching up Austin's latest wound with bandages. The injury might require a few stitches, but it looked worse than it was. On the plus side, Austin consoled himself, he would have matching scars on ei- ther side of his rib cage. He and Zavala were sitting in the galley with the Trouts, enjoying strong coffee and the warmth from the stove, when the cook, a Newfoundlander, asked if they wanted breakfast.

Austin realized they hadn't eaten since the jerky they had had the previous day. From the look in Zavala's eyes, he was equally hungry.

"Anything you can rustle up," Austin said. "Just make sure there's a lot of it."

"I can give you fish cakes and eggs," the cook said.

"Fish cakes?" Zavala said.

"Sure. It's a Newfie specialty."

Austin and Zavala exchanged glances. "No, thanks," they said.

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BEAR CAME THROUGH as promised. Therri had called the bush pilot on the radio, told him she needed to evacuate nearly fifty people and pleaded for his help. Ask- ing no questions, Bear had rallied every bush pilot within a hundred-mile radius. Floatplanes streamed in from every direction to airlift the passengers from the shore of the lake. The sick and elderly went on first, then the young. Therri stood on the beach, feeling a mix- ture of relief and sadness, and waved good-bye to her new friend Rachael.

Ryan's bloody badge of courage qualified him for a ride on one of the first planes out. With his shoulder wound patched up to stem the bleeding and prevent infection, he and the others were taken to a small but well-equipped provincial hospital. The Aguirrez brothers arranged their own transportation, calling in the EuroCopter to fly them back to the yacht with the news of their loss.

Before they left, Ben and some of the younger men in the tribe went back across

the lake to see what was left of Barker's complex. On their return, they reported that nothing remained. When Therri asked about the fate of the monster fish she had seen, Ben simply smiled and said, "Barbecued."

Therri, Ben and Mercer were among the last to leave. This time, the fuzzy dice in Bear's cockpit were reassuring. As the floatplane wheeled over the vast forest, she looked down at the huge blackened area around the devastated site of Barker's incredible building.

"Looks like we had a little forest fire down there," Bear yelled over the drone of the engine. "You folks know anything about that?"

"Someone must have been careless with a match," Mercer said. Seeing the skeptical expression in Bear's eyes, Mercer grinned and said, "When we get back, I'll tell you the whole story over a beer."

It actually took quite a few beers.

Austin and Zavala, in the meantime, enjoyed their reunion with the Trouts and the leisurely cruise back to port on Throckmorton's re- search vessel. Throckmorton was still in a state of shock at the reve- lation of Barker's mad scheme, and he promised to testify before Senator Graham's Congressional committee once he had filled in Parliament about the dangers of genetically modified fish.

Back in Washington, Austin met with Sandecker to fill him in on the mission. The admiral listened to the story of Barker's demise with rapt attention, but he saved most of his fascination for Duren- dal. He held the sword gingerly in his hands.

Unlike many men of the sea, Sandecker was not superstitious, so Austin hiked an eyebrow when the admiral gazed at the shimmer- ing blade and murmured, "This weapon is haunted, Kurt. It seems to have a life of its own."

"I had the same feeling," Austin said. "When I first picked it up, an electric current seemed to flow from the hilt into my arm."

Sandecker blinked as if he were coming out of a spell, and slid the sword back into its scabbard. "Superstitious rubbish, of course."

"Of course. What do you suggest we do with it?"

"There's no question in my mind. We return it to its last rightful owner."

"Roland is dead, and if the mummy I saw is Diego's, he won't be putting any claims on Durendal any time soon."

"Let me think about it. Do you mind if I borrow the sword in the meantime?"

"Not at all, although I could use it to cut through the mounds of paperwork."

Sandecker lit his cigar and tossed the match into his fireplace.

Flashing his familiar crocodile grin, he said, "I've always found fire to be much more effective in dealing with the effluent of our federal bureaucracy."

Sandecker's summons came a couple of days later. The admiral's voice crackled over the phone. "Kurt, if you have a minute, could you please come up to my office. Round up Joe, too. There are some peo- ple here who want to see you."

Austin tracked down Zavala in the deep-submergence design lab and gave him Sandecker's message. They arrived outside the admi- ral's office at the same time. The receptionist smiled and waved them through. Sandecker greeted them at the door and ushered them into the nerve center ofNUMA.

"Kurt. Joe. Good of you to come," he said effusively, taking them by the arm.

Austin smiled at Sandecker's disingenuous welcome. One had lit- tie choice when Sandecker called. Those who arrived late or not at all suffered the full weight of the admiral's wrath.

Standing behind Sandecker were Balthazar Aguirrez and his two sons. Balthazar roared with pleasure when he saw Austin. He pumped Austin's hand and then Zavala's in his lobster grip.

"I asked Mr. Aguirrez and his sons to stop by so we could thank them for helping us in Canada," Sandecker said. "I've been telling them about your mission."

"We couldn't have done it without your help," Austin said. "Sorry for the loss of your pilots and helicopter. And for Pablo's injury."

Aguirrez waved his hand in dismissal. "Thank you, my friend. The helicopter was only a machine and can easily be replaced. As you can see, my son's wound is healing nicely. The death of the pilots was a shame, but like all the men on my boat, they were highly paid mer- cenaries and well aware of the dangers of their chosen profession."

"Nonetheless, a tragic loss."

"Agreed. I'm pleased with the success of your mission, but do you have any news of the sword and the horn?"

"It seems your relics had a long and arduous journey," Sandecker said. "With the help of the log Kurt discovered in Barker's macabre museum, we've been able to piece the story together. Your ancestor, Diego, sailed across the Atlantic from the Faroe Islands. But he never reached land. He and his crew died, most likely from disease. The ship drifted into the polar ice. The zeppelin discovered the caravel hundreds of years later after a secret flight to the North Pole, and removed the body of your ancestor. Mechanical problems forced the airship down on the ice. The Kiolya found it, and re- moved the bodies of Diego and the zeppelin's captain, Heinrich Braun."

"Kurt has told me this story," Aguirrez said impatiently. "But what of the relics?"

Sandecker said, "Gentlemen, I'm being rude. Please sit down. I think it's time for some brandy."

The admiral waved his guests to the comfortable leather chairs in front of his massive desk and went over to a bar hidden behind a wall panel. He brought back a bottle of B and B and poured each man a snifter of brandy. He stuck his nose in the wide-mouthed glass, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he unlocked his hu- midor and produced a handful of his specially rolled cigars. He passed the cigars around and patted the breast pocket of his navy blazer.

"I seem to have lost my cigar clipper. You gentlemen don't hap- pen to have a knife? Never mind." He reached into the chair well of his desk, pulled out a scabbard and laid it on the desk. "Perhaps this will do."

Balthazar's dark eyes widened in disbelief. He rose from his chair and reached out for the scabbard, cradling it with both hands as if it were made of glass. With

shaking fingers, he slid the sword from the scabbard and held it high above his head as if he were rallying Charlemagne's legions to battle.

His lips formed a single whispered word. "Durendal.1) "The horn will arrive in a few days, along with the remains of your

ancestor," Sandecker said. "I thought you might be able to put these priceless relics together with their rightful owner."

Balthazar slid the sword back into the scabbard and passed it on to his sons.

"The rightful owners are the Basque people. I will use the sword and horn of Roland to ensure that the Basques finally attain their sov- ereignty." He smiled. "But in a peaceful manner."

The glee at the success of his theatrical gesture was evident in Sandecker's clear blue eyes. He raised his glass high. "Let's drink to that," he said.

Ryan called Austin later that day and said he was back in Washing- ton. He asked Austin to meet him at the "usual place." Austin arrived at Roosevelt Island a few minutes early, and was waiting in front of the statue, when he saw Ryan coming his way. Austin noticed that Ryan was still pale and gaunt from his wound. There was something else. The arrogant tilt of the chin and the boyish know-it-all grin that had flawed Ryan's good looks and irritated Austin were gone. Ryan seemed more serious and mature.

He smiled and extended his hand. "Thanks for coming, Kurt."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I've been used for target practice."

"I wish I could say you get used to it," Austin said, recalling the bullet and knife scars that marked his own body. "Knowing that you drove a spike into Barker's plans must help ease the pain. Congrat- ulations."

"Couldn't have done it without the help of Ben and Chuck, and Diego Aguirrez."

"Don't be modest."

"You're the one who's being modest. I heard about your adventures aboard the zeppelin."

"I hope this isn't turning into a mutual admiration society," Austin said. "I wouldn't want to ruin a wonderful relationship."

Ryan laughed. "I asked you here so I could apologize. I know I've been more than a little overbearing and self-righteous."

"Happens to the best of us."

"There's something else. I tried to use Therri to leverage your help."

"I know. I also know that Therri is too independent-minded to be used."

"I had to apologize, anyhow, before I leave."

"You sound as if you're heading off into the sunset."

"Like Shane? No, I'm not quite ready for that. I'm off to Bali in a few days to see if SOS can stop the illegal trade in sea turtles. Then I've got to help with a sea lion rescue in South Africa and see what we can do about poaching in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. In be- tween, I'll be raising funds to replace the Sentinel

"An ambitious schedule. Good luck."

"I'll need it." Ryan checked his watch. "Sorry to run, but I've got to line up the troops."

They walked back to the parking lot, where they shook hands once more.

"I understand you're seeing Therri later this week." "We're having dinner, as soon as we crawl out from our office work."

"I promise not to interrupt you the way I did back in Copen- hagen."

"Don't worry," Austin said. He glanced at the sky, a mysterious smile on his lips. "Where I'm taking Therri for dinner this time, no one will interrupt us."

MAY I POUR you more champagne, mademoiselle?" the waiter said.

"Thank you," Therri said with a smile. "I'd like that." The waiter refilled the fine crystal champagne glass and gave the bottle of Moot a professional twist. Then, with a click of his heels, he walked back to his station, ready to be summoned with the slightest hike of an eyebrow. He was impeccably dressed, his black hair was slicked back with shiny pomade, and a pencil-thin mustache adorned his upper lip. He possessed the perfect attitude, a bored detachment combined with undivided attention.

"He's wonderful," Therri whispered. "Where did you get him?" "Straight from the Orient Express," Austin said. Seeing the doubt in Therri's face, he added, "I confess. I borrowed him from NUMA food services. He worked as a maTtre d' at La Tour d'Argent in Paris before Sandecker hired him away to organize the NUMA dining room.

"He's done an outstanding job organizing our dinner," she said. They were sitting at a table for two. The tablecloth was white starched linen. The dishes and silverware were Art Deco. Dress was formal. Therri wore a knockout strapless black evening dress, and Austin had replaced the tux he'd ruined in the Washington dogsled race. She nodded in the direction of a string quartet that was play- ing Mozart in the background. "I suppose the musicians are from the National Symphony Orchestra."

Austin's mouth widened in a sheepish grin. "They're friends from the NUMA engineering division who get together on weekends. Quite good, aren't they?"

"Yes. And so was dinner. I don't know who your chef was, but-" She paused, catching the look in Austin's eye. "Don't tell me. The chef was NUMA, too."

"No. He's a friend of mine, St. Julien Perlmutter. He insisted on cooking for us tonight. I'll introduce you later."

She sipped her champagne, and her mood grew somber. "I'm sorry, but I can't help thinking from time to time of Dr. Barker and the monstrous creatures he created. It seems like a nightmare."

"I wish it were a bad dream. Barker and his pals were very real. So were his Frankenfish."

"What a strange, terrible man he was. I suppose we'll never know how someone so brilliant could become so evil."

"All the more amazing when you consider that his ancestor, from all accounts, was a decent human being. The original Frederick Barker saw that the Eskimos were starving and tried to stop his fel- low whaling captains from killing walrus."

"His genes must have been twisted during their passage from gen- eration to generation," she said.

"Add a little God syndrome into the genetic stew and you get a mad scientist who fancies himself the personification of an evil spirit."

"It's ironic, isn't it?" she said, after a moment's thought. "Barker was a product of genes gone wrong. It was precisely the process he used in his laboratory to create monsters from normally docile fish. I shudder every time I think of those poor deformed creatures." An anxious look came to her eyes. "This is the end of that insane re- search, isn't it?"

Austin nodded. "Barker was a true genius. He wrote nothing down. He kept the notes for his genetic tinkering stored in his head. That knowledge died with him."

"Still, it wouldn't prevent someone else, equally as brilliant, from duplicating his work."

"No, but the loopholes in the law will soon be closed. Biofish will not be allowed into the U.S. The Europeans are equally determined that Frankenfish and chips will never be on their menu. Without a market, there's no incentive."

"What about the others in the Kiolya tribe?"

"Arrested, dead or on the run. Without Barker to whip them into a murderous frenzy, I'd say it's the end of that bunch as a threat. Barker's holdings are up for grabs. The wolves are tearing his giant corporation to pieces. Now let me ask you a question. What's the fu- ture hold for you and SOS?"

"We're parting ways. I've decided that commando raids aren't my style. I've been

offered a staff position as environmental counsel with Senator Graham."

"Glad to hear you'll be around."

The waiter carried a black telephone over to the table. "Mr. Zavala would like to talk to you," he said.

Joe's voice came on the line. "Sorry to interrupt dinner. I thought you should know that we're going to start to make the approach soon.

"Thanks for the heads-up. How long do we have?"

"Enough for one very long dance."

Austin smiled and hung up. "That was Joe calling from the con- trol car. We'll be landing soon."

Therri stared out the large observation window at the tapestry of lights far below. "It's beautiful. I'll never forget this night. But please tell me how you wrangled the use of the zeppelin for a dinner date?"

"I had to pull a few strings. The Germans are anxious to reclaim the first airship to have landed on the North Pole. When I heard the zeppelin was being flown from Canada to Washington, I offered the services of an experienced pilot, and in return reserved the din- ing room for a few hours. It seemed the only way we could have din- ner undisturbed." He looked at his watch. "The pilot says we have time for one dance."

"I'd love to."

They rose from the table and Austin offered his arm, and they strolled into the dimly lit lounge. Austin turned on a record player, and the mellow tunes of the Glenn Miller band flowed from the speaker. "Thought we should have a little period music."

Therri was staring out the observation window at the lights of the great East Coast megalopolis. She turned and said, "Thank you for an exceptional evening."

"It's not over yet. After we land, we can have a nightcap at my place. Who

knows where the evening will lead ?"

"Oh, I know exactly where it will lead," she said with a dreamy smile.

He took her in his arms, inhaling the scent of her perfume, and high above the earth, they danced among the stars.

The End